leave me your starlight

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leave me your starlight

by findingkairos

Summary

For you the world, Phil.

Once upon a time, Philza Minecraft is the only person who does not shy away from the bloody teen that regularly turns the tide of war.

This cements a friendship that will last wars, empires, worlds, and lifetimes.

(Featuring: Back to Back Badasses, healthy relationships, accidental deification, intentional world domination, and Phil's past coming back to haunt his best friend.)

Notes

(*a journey for the two of us* — I will look for you as the sun rises higher)

See the end of the work for more notes

will you leave your shaded hollow

Chapter Summary

Phil joins a server faction's militia under unusual circumstances.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the day that they first meet, it's snowing.

The young man who's supposed to be guiding Phil around the castle's training field—"Just temporary," he assures, "until we can retake the bridge, and after that we'll be able to push north again."—skirts around a corner of the camp. He's not even subtle about it.

Eventually they reach the end of their long loop, trudging through the ankle-deep snow, and the awkwardness hovers in the air. Phil glances at the young man, then at the training field. "Is that all?"

"That's about it," his guide says, in that tone of people usually use when they're trying to gloss over something distasteful.

But Phil hasn't lived this long by glossing over things. He's long since learned that all knowledge is power, even the parts that people don't like to talk about. It also helps that this is a literal entire section of the camp, and if they're attacked in the middle of the night then Phil needs to know if he should avoid it or run towards it.

"What's that over there?" he asks, and points.

The guide swallows very visibly before he follows Phil's finger. "That's the Commander's tent."

The Commander's? Phil is momentarily confused. There's only one Commander that he knows about, and that's the one directly under the faction lord, who in turn orders around a handful of captains and lieutenants.

There's nervousness in the guide's tone, not the focused professionalism he's been using the past half-hour. Not a good sign, but then again that might just be *talking about a superior officer* nerves.

The guide says, "Well, I suppose now or never," and he starts walking toward the patch of snow-covered grass. His boots leave smudges in the trampled snow, and Phil hurries to catch up.

The tent looks the same as all the others: snow-proofed canvas with its entrance zipped or tied closed on the inside, the supports nailed into the ground. There's a lantern lit inside if the soft orange glow of the tent is any indication. Here, the quiet doesn't seem to be prompted by the layers upon layers of snow on the ground and that's still softly coming down from an iron-grey sky; rather, it seems… unnatural.

"I'd recommend being quick," Phil's guide says as he stops ten feet away from the tent. Phil stops with him, confused. The guide doesn't meet his eyes. "The Commander, he's—well, you'll see for yourself. Swing by the mess hall afterwards, we'll set you up with some stew."

The guide walks away. Phil watches him go, then turns back to the tent. It's not a particularly large tent, but it's not small, either. If this is the *Commander's*, then he doesn't have a larger living space than the rest of the soldiers gathered here.

Is that a point in his favor or against it? Phil doesn't know. But there's only way to find out.

It takes him a moment to cross the rest of the snow to the man's tent; another to tap lightly on it. He doesn't need to wait any before he's being called inside, and Phil pulls open the heavy tent flap with steady hands.

Phil's first thought when spotting the figure braced over a large wooden table is: *How tall is he?*

And then, in a belated realization: *Wait, he sounds* young.

"Hullo," the Commander says. He's looked up from whatever he's reading, and he has glasses that perch at the end of his nose. His hair's tied up and out of his face in a messy bun. He looks like he hasn't slept in a week.

But he stares at Phil with an intensity that automatically makes him take a step back, his wings coming up from where they're warming up his back through the cloak into a defensive position.

The Commander doesn't seem to notice. His eyes slide over Phil's shoulder instead. "Oh, wings? Neat. Are you any good with them?"

"What—"

"'cause, y'see," and here the Commander beckons Phil over and he turns away to point at a piece of the map. "If we can force an opening in their lines here, then we can turn it into a pincer maneuver. I've been having trouble inserting people behind the lines for the last week, but hey, if you can *fly*—"

"I'm sorry, sir," Phil says, because he isn't an idiot. "I just arrived today. I'm a little confused on what's going on."

"Oh." The Commander blinks, just a flutter of eyelashes. "Right. Your name?"

"Philza Minecraft, but everyone calls me Phil. I'm the—"

“One the faction lord recruited, yeah.” The Commander beckons Phil over again, and this time he goes, after he’s made sure to shake the snow from his boots. The Commander doesn’t seem to notice, having turned back to his map. “Here, let me explain,” he says, and he does. It’s quick, professional, all the relevant details laid out simply enough to follow but with enough information that it’s useful, not just the historical rundown he’d gotten from the guide.

Afterwards the Commander leans back to pin Phil with a considering look. “So. Do you think you can do it, or not?”

Phil looks over the route that the Commander has pointed out to him. Over a small hill and through the woods, cross the river, skirt around the far side of enemy-controlled territory to circle around the back. He can see how it would work, and it’s brilliant in its simplicity. If it’s successful, then the opposing faction will be wiped out in one fell swoop.

He’d still like some clarification before he commits, though. “Are you suggesting I be *flying* people over the river, sir?” Phil’s had experience in carrying heavy objects, but he’s not sure if he can manage a whole person and their weapons and gear, let alone multiple people.

“What? No.” The Commander slants a look at him, half-surprised, half-something that Phil doesn’t know how to read. “I’d be giving you potions and TNT. *Force an opening* doesn’t always mean throwing bodies at a problem, y’know.”

Oh. Well. That’s a lot better than what Phil had been expecting from a military commander who looks to be about fourteen- or fifteen-years-old. *Throw bodies at a problem until it’s fixed* is a strategy that Phil has seen many a faction lord use.

“You were really gonna do that?” He straightens up from his lean over the map table and Phil almost takes a step back because *damn* the Commander’s tall—but only almost. Phil leans back on his heels and stays in place instead.

There’s respect behind the glasses for that, now that Phil’s close enough to tell. The Commander snorts. “Go get dinner, get assigned a bunk. We’ll talk more in the morning.”

That’s a dismissal if Phil’s ever heard one. He’s nodded and turned around to leave when a thought strikes him at the threshold. “Uh…”

“Technoblade,” the Commander says. He doesn’t look up.

“Technoblade. Will you be getting dinner as well?” Because the tent might be well-lit but it’s still cold, and the Commander is still wearing his own heavy-duty cloak but there’s no heat source here that Phil can see. No softly steaming mugs of soup that’ll warm from the inside-out.

The Commander—Technoblade—pauses where he’s shifting little wooden markers over his map. “No need,” he says after a long moment where Phil wonders if he’s misstepped. “I’ll go when the dinner hour is over.”

That'll be when there's nothing *left*, Phil almost says, but there's something in Technoblade's voice that keeps him from protesting.

He turns instead. He goes.

"I thought he'd be a glory-seeking idiot."

"A bloodthirsty maniac, more like," Phil's dinner partner mutters. He knocks back another swallow of his drink, and Phil wonders for the third time in the last half-hour if there's something alcoholic in it. It would make sense; there's nothing like the warm buzz of ale or mead to chase off the brutal cold of the north. "You really haven't heard of him?"

"I haven't." And the thing is, it's *true*. Phil's only been reluctantly looped into participating in this war. He's got no idea who the big players in it are, other than the faction lords and their banners that he's made his very best attempts to avoid so far.

He gets the full rundown at dinner, the gossipers throwing wide-eyed looks over their shoulders. Phil would laugh at grown men and women being filled with such raw terror of a teenager if what they were telling him wouldn't be enough to keep *him* wary, too.

They say Technoblade is famed for his diamond sword, so light and yet wielded by such a strong sword arm that he cuts down entire swathes of the battlefield like so much wheat. They say his gold jewelry are all trophies he'd won from tournaments and in one-on-one duels at the age of eleven, twelve, thirteen. They say he towers over his peers and hides behind a skull mask; that he moves like something possessed; that he's a shapeshifting monster; that he drinks blood and eats raw meat.

It can't be farther from the young man that Phil's spent ten minutes with in a practically tiny tent. The kid is tall, but he's no taller than the iron golems patrolling the castle. He'd had glasses, and there'd been no jewelry on him save for practically demure gold earrings in his ears. He takes the most precise and efficient path to wherever he's going, and it's a quirk, not something disturbing.

But he'd had a sheathed sword slung at his hip, and his steps had been silent when he'd maneuvered around the table.

Rumors are rumors for a reason, Phil reminds himself. There's no point in protesting against them with his own observations. If an entire castle's worth of people—if an entire country's, an entire *server's* worth of people—are saying the same thing, it must be for a reason.

It must be.

Phil has to eat those words the next week when he realizes that no matter how poorly the castle inhabitants treat Technoblade, the teen never does anything to deserve their fear.

Whenever Phil passes by his tent the lanterns are still lit. He stands on top of the palisades and stares out over the horizon, a lone figure cloaked in red, and doesn't shiver even when

people pass by him with whispers. When Phil's called in for another round of planning, he spots a softly steaming mug filled with tea that smells faintly like peppermint. When Phil looks around as Technoblade shuffles through his maps, there are stacks of books next to the armor stand. The teen himself makes deadpan jokes that would be cutting on anyone else but is just sarcastic in his dry tone during those planning sessions that always run too long.

Phil drops the 'sir' title three days in, just to see what'll happen. Contrary to the castle inhabitant's popular belief, Technoblade does not get angry, bare his teeth, or demand that Phil show him 'the proper respect,' not like the faction lord would have done if Phil had tried it with him.

Technoblade doesn't even seem to notice, instead continuing to debate with him about long-dead men and women and the stories that history tells about them.

He doesn't say a lot to anyone else, really. When they're all out on the training field, sludging through the snow and practicing sword fighting until people tap out, he's a silent watchful figure that makes slow circuits through the gathered men and women. It doesn't make them stop flinching, but he doesn't seem surprised either.

Phil doesn't understand. This is somebody that they're trusting to win them a war, but they don't seem to treat him well or make him feel welcome. At best, they're tolerating him. At worst—

Phil stops the thought there. He's just here because the faction lord recruited him, after all. As soon as this is done and over with, he's gone. There are worlds to explore, biomes to discover, skies to fly in that aren't heavy with snow clouds.

And then he participates in his first sortie.

It's—a lot. Phil knows how to fight, because when you travel alone as he so often does, with wings that people eye in envy, then not knowing how to wield a sword or an axe or a bow is practically asking for someone to come and kill you.

But Technoblade is on another level. He's leagues beyond anyone else. Half of the time Phil is in the air, making strafing runs with his crossbow, trying and failing to keep the enemy off of the Commander's back—not because Phil misses his shots, but because Technoblade is fast enough to deal with the problem before he needs Phil to deal with it. It lets him see just how much of the field that Technoblade cuts down.

And the term really is *cuts down*. The Commander moves swiftly, strikes cleanly, and is there-and-gone with such grace that he makes it look like a dance. Almost idly, Phil narrates the deaths to himself instead of looking at the world chat: a strike through the heart here, a clean death via decapitation there.

By the end of it the Commander isn't even breathing hard, just exhaling plumes of heat into the cold air. Through the skull-like mask that he'd put on before the sortie, it almost looks like fabled dragon's smoke. But he stands alone; none of the soldiers under his command approach him, not even to provide a report.

Phil looks down at the man—the kid—from where he's coasting on the high-sky thermals and thinks: fuck it.

He comes in for a landing, half expecting to get jumped, but the Commander either must have seen him coming or have nerves of steel; he doesn't even flinch when Phil kicks up a foot of snow.

"Mind some company?" he asks.

There's a moment of silence. Then, almost hesitantly, so at odds to the confident teen that Phil's just watched wipe out half a battlefield: "Sure."

Phil sidles closer. The quiet resettles. He takes the moment to run a quick inventory—he's out of arrows but his bow's got Mending, it's in no danger of breakage just yet. He's also gone through the entire sachet of potions and TNT that Technoblade had handed him before the sortie. He must have noticed that, though—explosions and people dying of single hits isn't exactly subtle—

"You did well today," the Commander says, and Phil's head snaps up from his bag. Technoblade isn't facing him, but neither can Phil tell if he's looking—the mask conceals that much at least, and Phil's not enough of an idiot to encroach on the guy's personal space.

And then the words filter through his head. "Oh. Uh, thanks, mate. I really didn't do a lot, though—"

"No, I mean it." Technoblade turns, and Phil had been aware of the height difference, but it's one thing to see it before a maps table where the both of them have been arguing over tactics and strategy, and another to see it freshly post-battle. Technoblade's weapons are sheathed but the handle of the axe rising behind his head adds intimidation to someone who could easily accomplish it with just his height. Phil's feathers rustle before he curbs the flinch.

Technoblade continues, voice now resettled back into his usual tone: "I asked you to do a dangerous thing with little backup, and you rose to the occasion. You went above and beyond what I'd expected you to do."

There's something in that deadpan voice though, and it's that knowledge and nights of joking mid-planning that drives Phil to say, "Throwing potions of weakness and dropping lit TNT is pretty simple; I *really* didn't do anything much. But. Thanks."

Technoblade—tilts his head, just a little bit. Just enough that Phil's reminded of the wolves he's seen in the woods, or maybe one of the big cats: something intrigued by what it's found.

"Of course," the kid says after, and it's only because he's now paying attention that Phil catches the way the lips quirk upwards the slightest of amounts. "I'm looking forward to seeing more of what you can do, Phil."

When he wakes up the next morning, he gets the news: he, Philza Minecraft, has been promoted three ranks and named the Commander's adjutant.

“I’m looking forward to working with you,” Technoblade repeats, but there is such weariness, such pasted-over exhaustion in his voice.

Phil thinks back to what the soldier who’d delivered his reassignment had said—*Good luck. Hope you last longer than the others did. No shame in quitting, though.*—and replies, “Same, mate, same,” with the brightest smile that he’s got.

And—yeah. Bingo. The informality that would make anyone else cringe just rewards him with another Technoblade smile, the kind that is extremely tiny and hard to see unless you know what you’re looking for.

Yeah, Phil can work with this.

Chapter End Notes

Phil, spotting this 15-year-old kid who does his best to not get anyone under his command killed but is shied away from by literally everyone: ...well, I guess this is my first friend on this server now.

Technoblade absolutely moves in an unsettling fashion. Our boy has no chill, and we love him for it.

your boldness stands alone among the wreck

Chapter Summary

They live in fear of him, and Phil doesn't really understand it—until he does.

Chapter Notes

I was first introduced to Technoblade about five years ago by a dear friend of mine. I'm so proud of how far he's come.

As an adjutant, Phil becomes the bridge between Technoblade and everyone else. He answers questions about rations, about supplies, about patrols. He fields couriers ducking in from the cold and he takes reports from scouts who wrap stiff fingers around mugs of ale and tell him, wide-eyed, of their enemy's numbers.

The ambush that had been Phil's first glimpse into the legend of Technoblade had wiped out their enemy in that sortie, true, but it had gained them three others. "They're all allied with each other," the Commander had said afterwards, and his voice had been so flat that it had made the Captains and Lieutenants in the room flinch. Phil had stood to the side and wondered if they saw the same bowed spine that he did, and doubted it. "They're going to go to war for each other, even if it's the most idiotic thing to do."

And Technoblade's prediction had proven right. The faction lord had been ecstatic, because he wants a sweeping, crushing victory to prove his dominance.

The Commander himself had stared into his mug of peppermint tea afterwards and quietly asked Phil to clear the map of wooden tokens.

Phil checks the sky, then the shoddy thing that passes for a calendar here. Winter will soon come and sink in its teeth, and then everything will be at an impasse. No wars will be fought until spring. He doesn't know if he'll be here that long.

"How's it looking out there?" Technoblade asks when Phil ducks back into his tent. For the third time today, Phil swallows the words on his tongue, the equally flat tone of *Why do you sleep in the same place that you work?*

Instead he answers: "Not good. There's a storm blowing in from the south."

“Really?” Technoblade looks up. His glasses are smudged; there’s charcoal smeared on his chin. He’s been marking up the maps again.

“Mate, did you at least eat lunch?”

“Oh.” That gets him a slow blink. “Uh. No.”

Another thing that comes with being an adjutant, Phil thinks wryly to himself. At least he hasn’t shaken off the snow from his boots just yet. “I’ll go get you something. Anything in particular you want?”

And as always, Technoblade waves him off. “Whatever’s fine.”

Phil knows that to be the lie that it is now. “Stew, then,” he says—puts just enough snark in his tone that he knows the guy will hear it—and waits to see the smile-twitch before he goes.

Which isn’t to say that Technoblade is making a poor decision; stew is perfectly fine as a meal. But Phil’s pretty good at guesstimating ages and he’s also pretty sure the guy is still growing. Some meat will be good for him.

“So… how is it, working with the Blade?”

Phil has to take a mental double-take. “I’m sorry?”

“You know.” The faction lord leans in, eyes wide and darting around. “*The* Blade.”

For all that’s good—“You mean Technoblade?”

“Yeah, yeah, him.” He waves off Phil’s correction. “But, y’know, how is it?”

This isn’t the first time that Phil’s been asked this. Usually it’s been soldiers in the castle who want to know how the Commander’s been treating him, or support staff doing what they can to pass the time. But this particular faction lord, who’d heard of Philza Minecraft and had strongarmed him into joining a conflict that he has no interest in—he has *agendas*.

“It’s been going well.” Phil doesn’t need to mull over his words before he says them, because it’s the truth.

And just like everybody else, the faction lord doesn’t seem to believe him. “You don’t have to spare my feelings,” he laughs, and puts a hand on Phil’s shoulder and squeezes. “I’m no delicate wilting flower! The Blade is *intense*, my friend, and we all know it.”

“He is that,” Phil agrees, still looking for the stinger in the tail.

“My, back when I first recruited him, I thought to myself: are the rumors true? Could they have lied? But in the months since, he has proven me wrong. He has been everything the rumors painted him as, and far more.”

Phil shifts so that that faction lord’s hand falls away. “Oh?”

“Yes!” The faction lord beams, as though he thinks Phil is on his side and will be proud of him for whatever he says next. “So just let me know, Philza, if he ever makes the job too rough on you, eh? The past adjutants were all people who’d grown up on the server, see, and it was no skin off my nose to let them simply quit the job—but you and I, I think, have a better relationship than *that*.”

There’s something here that Phil’s not seeing. It’s in the lord’s voice, the tone, the way he carries himself. He excuses himself from this very uncomfortable conversation as soon as he can.

He keeps an eye out for the next few days, but nothing comes of the conversation. Technoblade’s behavior is as steady and predictable as ever, in his own way.

Phil still doesn’t let down his guard.

Phil gets in the habit of asking the cooks for a second portion whenever he goes for a meal. They side-eye him, but ultimately accept it as the new state of affairs. The people in the mess hall don’t flag him down for conversations when he passes by with two servings in hand, just watch him with something bordering uncomfortably on gratitude and surprise.

He doesn’t understand it. If this had been any other server, Phil’s sure, they would all have been falling over themselves to ingratiate themselves to Technoblade. Might makes right in places like these, even if it’s not a complete anarchy server like 2b2t or a tournament-hub like Hypixel.

Phil doesn’t question it, because when he sets down a bowl of stew at Technoblade’s elbow, he invariably gets some sort of acknowledgement. Sometimes it’s a nod; more often it’s a quick distracted ‘thanks’ before the guy goes straight back into his books or his maps or his potions.

In anyone else it would be rude. Here, Phil watches the stiff shoulders under permanent armor and thinks about the fact that he’s never seen Technoblade without it.

He takes care of it, too, in the way that soldiers maintain their weapons and gear: professionally, and with the understanding that it’s the equipment that will save or lose their lives in the middle of a fight. Phil recognizes it because he does it himself; survival is not at all like war except in those ways in which it is.

It’s a little ridiculous. This kid that Phil’s only known for about a month is a kindred soul, deep down. He doesn’t blink when Phil can’t quite hide his glee at killing Endermen or messing subtly with the more stuck-up Captains and Lieutenants. He doesn’t give Phil shit for having wings or needing to take an hour every night to preen. He doesn’t say a word when Phil double-checks his armor and golden apples every morning, habit after long years alone in a hardcore survival world.

“Isn’t his task almost done?”

“He should leave,” someone mutters, and the bitterness *drips* from their words. Phil slows down to a stop, muffles the clink of his gear. He doesn’t have an invis pot on him but going unheard is just as important as going unseen when eavesdropping. “It’s over, it’s *done*. He’s not even from this server originally, is he?”

“He isn’t.”

“He should go back to where he came from. Blood and war is all he’s good for, and after this last push—things will go back to how they were *before*.”

“You really think?”

“I *know* so.”

How long have sentiments like this been brewing? Scratch that, how has Phil not noticed?

How has *Technoblade?*

“They’ve always been like that,” Technoblade says that night when Phil asks him about it. He doesn’t meet Phil’s eye. “It’s the usual talk, Phil, don’t worry about it.”

“It’s not *usual*,” Phil tries, because he’s not sure how else to say it. “Technoblade—”

“It *is*.” Technoblade finally looks up at him, but there’s none of the anger or annoyance or hesitance or even anxiety that Phil expects. The Commander just looks *confused*, like he doesn’t understand why Phil is making such a big deal out of this. “That’s why I’m here, y’know? That’s why we’re *all* here—fighting a war so that someone can win, and then the fighting’ll be done.”

He doesn’t seem to understand. Phil can’t *make* him understand, either—not only is this more Technoblade’s fight than it has ever been Phil’s, he’s not the person that they’re talking smack about. Phil has no attachment to this land, whereas Technoblade takes every casualty personally, even if they safely respawn in their beds within the castle.

All he can do is quietly support him and hope that the sentiment makes it across.

The ‘last push,’ as they’ve been calling it, happens later that week.

It’s a week full of chaos. Phil has a small army of Captains and Lieutenants for him to send off running, and he makes full use of them in preparation. He has them soak arrows in weakness potions and hone each sword to a devastating edge. He makes sure they stock fire resistance and TNT in equal measure. Their scouts, he loads down with invisibility potions almost until they can no longer move silently; their cavalrymen and women, he ensures their horses each have an appointment with the castle veterinarian.

Throughout it all, Technoblade keeps poring over field reports and maps and weather predictions like they’re food. Phil has to haul him back by the shoulder at three different points just to get him to eat *actual* meals. The fact that Technoblade lets him do that at all

says—something, but to be honest Phil is running on five hours of sleep and three cups of coffee. He doesn't have the intellectual capacity to properly appreciate this right now.

And then the final day, as he's been unwittingly calling it in his head, arrives.

It's well before sunrise when Phil trudges his way up to the castle walls, nodding back to the night shift soldiers at their posts who salute him. The weather has managed to hold out; the storm had ended up swerving at the last moment, veering past them to the west. Phil can't complain, not when Technoblade had sighed in relief over it and muttered something about being able to discard three of the less workable backup plans now that there'd been no weather to throw them off.

(Sometimes, Technoblade scares him. Not because of the sword arm or the keen nose for blood that half the castle, its faction lord, and all the civilian inhabitants seem to be afraid of him for; but because of just how many plans he works through in his head. His slanted handwriting isn't cramped, but parts of it are written in shorthand that takes Phil long minutes to puzzle out, let alone the sections in cypher that Phil hadn't been able to crack at all until Technoblade had given him the key.)

It's going to be a fair day. That's what all the weather reports had predicted, backed up by the old grandmother of the castle to whom the more superstitious—or more world-wise folk, Phil hasn't been able to tell the difference quite yet—listen to. Phil still bundles up and looks to the south, where the wind currently blows from, searching the horizon for clouds.

There's none. No storm nor rain, and Phil lets out a sigh of relief. One less thing for Technoblade to worry about when he wakes up, then.

He'll just worry over the rest of it, all the hundred and one other variables that go into a war, but Phil can't exactly stop him from doing that. He's not entirely sure he wants to, either—Technoblade is comfortable when walking through the dusty courtyard where their soldiers train, handing out tips in his own awkward, encouraging way, but he seems to be in his element when he's surrounded by his books and papers and maps, turning his incredible intellect to one purpose.

Let me know if he ever makes the job hard on you, the faction lord had said. Phil wonders, almost idly, his feathers bristling unintentionally, just what he'd meant by *hard* or what the past adjutants had considered *difficult*.

The fight itself starts off differently than Phil's last. For one, Phil is no longer in the air, the lynchpin in Technoblade's plan that will critically weaken a wing of the enemy so that they can punch through in a pincer movement. He's right by Technoblade's side instead, keeping swordsmen off him, hauling up his shield before he can cut down the arrows. He's close enough that Technoblade's strength potions splash him when the guy re-applies, and every time Phil can feel the zing in his blood that those magics bring.

He stretches out his wings, flares them sharply wide, and knocks down an enterprising little bugger who'd thought to creep up on them unawares. A sword to the throat takes him out cleanly, and Phil flicks the blood off his blade even as it fractures into light. He checks

Technoblade but, no, the guy is still going strong. He's bounding across the field, light in a way that Phil's never seen in a wingless person.

Like the first fight that Phil had ever seen him in, like every 1v1 duel that the castle soldiers have ever taunted him into, like every monstrous rumor that has ever painted him as a divine god of war—Technoblade dances, and for a moment, Phil can't look away.

It means he sees the hidden archer with a crossbow lingering behind the ruins of the archery siege tower.

The rest of the battlefield is as much of a mess as it always is, when panic strikes and the orderly line fragments into chaos. No one else is looking. No one else would *care*, anyway, when they're all fighting for their lives and they all think Technoblade invincible. There's every chance that Phil is going to be redundant, that Technoblade has already seen the threat—he seems to have eyes in the back of his *head* sometimes—that he's making a mistake in his desperate lunge for someone who doesn't need to be saved—

And yet Phil does it. There is a moment, where he could have chosen differently, but he commits and he knows in that moment that he can do nothing else.

He skids in the snow. The mud and grime have turned what's already untenable footing into something murderous, where getting caught in it will be the reason for a death. Phil casts out his wings to use them as a counterweight, swings himself around, and shoves—

The arrow pierces him in the junction between shoulder and torso where the armor doesn't cover. It's a bit of pain, a lot of an annoyance, but he manages to get into position. Most people need two hands to wield a sword, but then again most people do not live in hardcore worlds of their own free will.

With one hand, Phil presses down on the arrow to keep it from jostling. With the other, he throws out a knife—

Which doesn't even turn out to be needed, because Technoblade is there in the next moment, his diamond sword glinting in the sun as it cleaves through the archer.

Someone is shouting. Phil blinks, resettles his grip on his own sword, pulls his wings back in because he's never really gotten in the habit of advertising them. He blinks again, trying to get rid of the spots in his vision, and hisses when movement jostles the thing in his shoulder—no. Someone's snapped the arrow shaft, leaving an inch and the head still in him.

"Phil," someone is saying, and that someone is Technoblade. Phil refocuses. They're in the middle of a fight, he can't slow down, not even for an adjutant. "Phil, what the *hell* were you thinking—"

"I'll take a potion and walk it off," Phil snaps out, because Technoblade turns the tide of battle by his mere presence alone. "You know this won't kill me. Go clean things up, mate, I'll just pull it out and down a potion and be on your tail in just a sec."

Mid-fight is a terrible time to study someone's face, but the image burns itself into Phil's eyes anyway: Technoblade, blood splattered on his skull mask, dark eyes glinting behind them. He stands tall and proud, enough that Phil has to tilt his head back, and there's—something, in the line of his shoulders, the slope of his spine—

"Fine," Technoblade says, and finally it is something that is not in a deadpan but Phil can't even take the victory because that voice is tinged with something *sharp*. He'd take a step back if he weren't pinned in place by the weight of Technoblade's attention on him. "But trust me, we'll be having *words* about this later."

And then he's gone, sweeping away with a flash of his dark red cloak, and it's all Phil can do to keep true to his word and then follow.

Technoblade turns on a heel and almost run into him as soon as the last enemy combatant is gone. He—hesitates isn't the right word. He doesn't stumble, either, but he does pause deliberately as soon as he sees Phil.

"Why did you do that?" he asks at last, after long enough that Phil'd seriously considered reaching for another golden apple just to stave off the awkwardness.

"What?"

"You know what I mean." Technoblade jerks his head back to where the archer with the crossbow had been, because he has extreme awareness of his surroundings and has spatial memory like no one Phil's ever seen before. "You threw yourself at the crossbowman. You were halfway across the field, Phil—"

"More like a third of the way," Phil says, because Technoblade likes it when he snarks back.

And Technoblade—he makes a noise in the back of his throat, something half high-pitched and half-guttural snarl, and the mix makes the hair rise on the back of Phil's neck. He's never heard anything like this from the guy before. He's never heard anything like this, ever, *period*.

"*You know what I mean*," Technoblade repeats, and Phil brings up both empty hands in surrender and swallows down the wince at the shoulder movement.

Technoblade notices anyway, because of course he does. It's hard to see the minute changes in his expression beneath the skull mask, but Phil can imagine the sloping eyebrows and narrowed eyes well enough. "You know me. I'm Technoblade, and Technoblade never dies. I could have handled it."

"But you shouldn't have to." Phil lowers his hands and resettles himself on his feet. "I could help, so I did."

"You shouldn't have to help me," Technoblade snaps back, but there's—something else in his voice. It's not just teenage defensiveness or hurt pride. "I know what I'm doing, Phil, and I would have seen the arrow coming. It's not like he was being *subtle* or anything, like, man,

what a guy, couldn't he have picked a better hiding spot for an ambush attempt like that? It's almost sad!"

The crossbowman hadn't been intending an ambush in the middle of a battlefield; everyone on alert, with adrenaline already pumping through their veins? It would never have worked. But he had seen a chance, and he'd taken it, and Phil had seen his own chance.

"I don't doubt that you know what you're doing." Phil says it slowly, as genuinely as he can, and finally that seems to—if not slow Technoblade down, then at least intrigue him enough to listen for the rest of it. "You're right, he wasn't subtle. You might have seen it coming; you definitely wouldn't have died from a strike like that." Crossbow, against diamond armor that's been enchanted to the Nether and back with protections strong enough to hum in Phil's teeth when he touches it?

Technoblade never dies, and he certainly wouldn't have died today.

And yet.

"But you shouldn't have to deal with that," Phil says quietly, and something in Technoblade's stance—fractures, coalesces, becomes something sharp enough to cut.

"Because you're my adjutant?" he asks. He sounds—upset, genuinely upset, and this is not a victory that Phil would ever have wanted in any circumstance.

"Because you're my *friend*."

Technoblade rears back like Phil had physically struck him. He himself wants to smack himself on the back of the head, because damn, Phil'd been *meaning* to swallow that and never let it see the light of day. He doesn't know how long he's going to stay, and even if he gets along with the guy that half the server is pinning their hopes on, when he's done that's it. He'll be gone, probably never to venture onto another public server again.

But the words are out there now, and like his mum had liked to say, words once spoken can't be taken back. And Phil—

Technoblade inhales, slowly, steadily. He exhales. He says, *asks*, "Friend?"

Phil had made a choice, fifteen minutes ago, six hours ago, two weeks and five days ago. He is a survivalist. He does not go back on his choices.

"Friend," Phil repeats, and then, because he would never take someone else's wings away: "Only if you want to be, though. I understand if you want to keep it more professional, less personal."

"I think we kinda broke that two weeks ago, not gonna lie," Technoblade replies drily. He resettles himself—not quite like Phil's own feathers reshuffling, but something like it, he thinks; maybe water, returning to the shape of its container. The surface of a swift-running river smoothing out. "…okay."

That's so Technoblade, it throws Phil for a moment. "Okay?"

“Okay,” Technoblade says again. “Friends. Allies, whatever. Just don’t take stupid risks again, alright? I won’t have an ally throw themselves into danger when it’s not necessary, that’s *stupid*.”

And because Phil can say nothing else, he says, “Alright.”

The rest of the castle stays clear of Technoblade’s and Phil’s path on their slow journey back to camp, and Phil’s only half-confident it’s because of the blood and viscera and not because of the person wearing it.

The rest of him is too busy side-eying the fact seriously, no one else has the guts to engage the kid in conversation? Really? He just almost single-handedly won them a *war*, for the *second time* and they stay away in—what, fear?

But that last battle changes things. Somehow, Phil has become the only person who’s allowed to stand *behind* Technoblade. In the traditional post-battle celebration, in the morning-after people herding, in tense negotiations with the opposing faction: Phil no longer needs to stand to the side of the kid when circumstances demand such formality, because when he passes by the kid’s back, he no longer gets the slight tilt of the head that means Technoblade is echolocating him, or the tensing shoulders or knees that means he’s getting ready to duck.

Phil is allowed access to his back—armored, yes, because Technoblade *goes to sleep in it*, but still. That’s—fuck. That’s a lot.

Nobody else gets that sort of privilege. Technoblade seems to have eyes in the back of his head, whether that’s knowing if someone is passing behind him or if someone on the battlefield is winding up for a strike to his blind spot. Those times, he unfailingly gets himself ready to win a brawl, and after seeing him throw down with five soldiers in the sparring ring during training, Phil doesn’t doubt that he’d win against anyone foolish enough to jump him.

And at his spot behind Technoblade’s back, Phil finds that he sees a lot.

“Thank you for your hard work,” the faction lord says. He keeps his eyes on Technoblade, even though Phil is standing right there behind Technoblade’s shoulder, a listening party but unseen in the way that servants and military subordinates tend to become on this server. It’s an interesting phenomenon, but a useful one, and one that Phil fully exploits now to listen in.

“No problem,” Technoblade says, his deep voice rumbling. He sounds uncomfortable. Phil shifts so that he’s back in Technoblade’s sightline, still behind his shoulder but now visible out of the corner of his eye, and the guy shifts his stance. Relaxes, just a little. “Glad I could help.”

“And *we* were glad you were here!” the faction lord chuckles, and puts a hand on Technoblade’s armored shoulder to squeeze. Technoblade doesn’t move, gone as still as the birds do on Phil’s windowsill when he’d been back home and feeding them breadcrumbs. “Come find me later, mm? I think we have much to discuss.”

“Sure,” Technoblade says, and doesn’t seem to breathe until the faction lord is long gone. Then he sighs, long and silent.

Phil bites the inside of his cheek and debates with himself. Concern wins out. “Everything alright, mate?”

Technoblade turns on his heel and starts them walking out of the castle and back to his tent again. “Yeah. Everything’s fine.”

If Phil left him without a word, now that the war’s over—

“What’re you gonna do now?” he asks instead. Information is imperative to survival, and Phil is the most infamous throughout the worlds as a survivalist for a reason.

Technoblade inhales. Exhales. “I dunno. Contract’s not over yet.”

Phil stumbles, and Technoblade catches him by the arm. It’s gentle, but he can’t pay attention to that right now, because—“Contract? What contract?”

Technoblade releases him once it’s clear that Phil has his footing again and turns away. Phil —

He reaches out, rests his hand on Technoblade’s forearm. The guy stills. “Technoblade. What contract?”

“That guy hired me for a job,” Technoblade snorts without looking at him. “That’s prob’bly what he wants to talk about, actually. Maybe he’ll want to renegotiate?”

Maybe. Hopefully. Oh, gods, if the gods are good, then that will be all that the faction lord wants from him. But Phil had seen the man’s eyes when talking about how Technoblade is *difficult*, and he’d seen the man’s greed in knowing that he had won a war for the server through the efforts of someone who the masses are whispering is a blood god.

He’s going to need to have a talk with the faction lord, isn’t he.

“Maybe,” Phil answers belatedly, and keeps on Technoblade’s heels as they duck back into his tent for another night of militia paperwork.

when the time for sleep is through

Chapter Summary

The war is over. It's time to go home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Phil floats by in a haze of unease for the next few days. Thankfully he doesn't need to do much; they want Technoblade sitting in on the post-war conversations, and Phil just needs to stand at his shoulder, friendly and approachable.

It pays off when he can cut into a conversation before Technoblade can become uncomfortable, nip unwanted questions at the bud, gently shoo off well-meaning folks who've had a little too much to drink.

Some of them, Phil doesn't recognize. They're probably from the opposing side, here as part of the peace talks that will re-establish the political borders of this server. Some of them recognize him, do double-takes at his wings and his robes and his—everything, really.

After one such conversation where Phil makes off with Technoblade like they've got withers on their tails, Technoblade asks, "Why don't you hide them?"

Phil makes sure that their pursuers are gone before he glances back up. "I'm sorry?"

"You know exactly what I mean." Technoblade peers at him like he's a logistics problem to be solved. It's a little unnerving, especially behind the skull mask that the guy wears to these ridiculous events, but Phil's seen him this morning when his hair'd still been a mess. "Your wings. You can conceal them, can't you?"

His wings rustle before he can stifle the reaction. Technoblade huffs and nods slightly like he's confirmed something to himself, but he doesn't say a word.

Well, it's a question that'd been destined to come up if Phil's past experience with strangers and wings had been anything. It just surprises him that it's taken Technoblade this long to ask when he'd referred to Phil's wings so nonchalantly the first time they'd met.

But he's still got a question to answer. "How much do you know about wings?"

"How much?" Technoblade cocks his head. "The stuff everybody knows, I s'ppose. You can only get them if you make it through the End in a singleplayer survival world, and if the gods like you, and if you manage to pierce the ender dragon through in one stroke of the blade, et

cetera et cetera." He even fully pronounces the *et ceteras* like the nerd he is. "But you can fold them and conceal them, right?"

"Yeah." Phil concentrates and reaches for the little spark of warmth that's made a home in his chest, and for the first time in—gods, it has to be months—he dismisses the wings. Almost immediately, his back feels lighter, and he overbalances.

Technoblade catches him by the elbow before he can actually topple over. "You don't do that often, do you," he says dryly, more statement than question.

Phil still nods in answer. "After I received them, I just—never got in the habit of dismissing them, y'know? I don't know how much you know about the End, mate, but if you can—go into it blind. It's a special experience, between you and the rest of the universe."

Technoblade tilts his head to stare at him from behind the skull mask. He still hasn't released Phil's elbow. "You just—never did? Even though you can't put on a *chest plate* with the wings?"

"Yeah." Phil smiles wryly, shoves down the urge to feel offended because Technoblade isn't being condescending, he's genuinely curious. "Flying's great, y'know? I didn't want to give that up."

"I see."

There's a little bit of silence after that, where Techoblade squeezes Phil's elbow softly, just once, before releasing him. Phil misses it almost immediately; without his wings he realizes he's been subconsciously leaning forward, even though they don't weigh as heavily as they should if the universe's elytras operated on any proper definition of physics. He clears his throat instead and reaches again for that twist of warmth to settle his wings behind his shoulders.

They shimmer back in with his usual falcon's feathers, and Technoblade stares at them with —an expression on his face. Phil doesn't recognize it.

Then he nods once, firmly, the same one he'd give their militia's scouts after their reports. "Alright then."

Phil's not sure what he's just missed. "Alright?"

"Alright," Technoblade repeats—now *definitely* smiling at him, Phil doesn't need to see his expression to hear it in his voice—and turns away. "C'mon. Time to face the music again, right? The faster we're done with this, the faster we can leave."

And like always, all Phil can do is follow.

"And him?"

The faction lord makes an inquiring noise. The ambassador gestures. Behind Technoblade's shoulder, Phil can't see the Commander's expression but he can imagine it: impassive,

unmoving, silently intent.

“It’s something I’ve been wondering for a while now.” The ambassador leans back in their chair. “Are you a server citizen, Technoblade? Or are you here as a mercenary?”

Before Technoblade can answer, the faction lord does: “No worries about that, my friend!” He chuckles. Phil glares, but he doesn’t seem to notice. “You won’t have to worry about militarization on this server anymore.”

He says this with so much unbridled confidence that a chill runs down Phil’s spine. The only reason to no longer need militarization on a server at all is if the entire community culture becomes similarly pacifist—or if there is an overwhelming opposing force that demands disarmament.

Contracts, Phil remembers, and wonders what kind of circumstances would have prompted Technoblade to make a deal with a man like this.

There’s a shift in the air towards the end of the peace talks.

The rest of the castle has been in a good mood all week. Phil’s almost dragged into it himself, chattering with laundresses who smile brightly enough to rival the sun, chuckling at the prospect of the end of the war with those tired soldiers and Lieutenants who are looking forward to trading in their swords for plows.

Even the opposing faction seems to walk lighter, genuine hope lining their strides. It doesn’t mean there’s not their fair share of sore losers who wish that their side of the war had won, of course, but there doesn’t seem to be any ill will towards them.

Not more than usual, anyway, and most of those who’d been scared shitless of Technoblade’s reputation have turned the corner and are now doing their best to suck up to him. It would be hilarious if Phil weren’t the one who Technoblade hides behind, and thus becomes the one who has to play telephone to pass on their simpering flattery to an increasingly irate Techoblade.

Or, well, it *is* hilarious. It just also wears on Phil’s patience like nothing else.

Technoblade laughs at him when they both attempt to duck a particularly stubborn ambassador and end up shivering in the cold. “Y’know, I don’t really think this is gonna help our case much,” he chuckles. “Two of the war’s greatest warriors, cowering away from social conversation?”

But he’s got that self-deprecating tone to his deadpan voice, and Phil smiles even as he huddles under his cloak. “We’re not the ones that have to deal with this.” And thank the gods for *that*. No, it’s just the faction lord—the very same one that Phil’s been trying to track down all week and the very same one who’s been avoiding him with the very valid excuse of trying to settle the peace terms of a server-wide war.

Still. Phil could do with a little less convenient excuses in his life.

“Nah,” Technoblade says, and chuckles again. “’s why we’re not the nobles of the server, man. Havin’ to deal with people all day? No thank you.”

No, Phil rather thinks that’d be Technoblade’s worst nightmare. For someone who can command a room with ease, the guy doesn’t always succeed with the social niceties.

“Where’d you rather be, then?”

Technoblade hums. It’s still hard to see where he’s looking with that mask of his, but his own cloak’s hood is down and he doesn’t seem tense under his armor at least. “Weirdly, I actually kinda miss home.”

“Home?”

“Yeah. I didn’t grow up here, this ain’t my server.” Technoblade huffs out a laugh, quiet and soft. “Didn’t think I would, y’know? At first, I was all rarin’ to leave and make a name for myself. Got recommended this server and managed to wrangle a sweet deal, at least.”

Phil still has not forgotten about the faction lord. If he’s talking about a *deal*, then—

“What kind of deal?” he asks, trying to sound as non-aggressive as possible. He somewhat succeeds.

“Oh, y’know. I fight in the server war, he opens up the roads to the server portals again.” Technoblade shrugs, just a little. “They’re always worried about server traffic and gettin’ enough people walkin’ through, back home. Never quite understood the worry since hey, we’re pretty popular, but it’s an easy enough fix.”

Phil kind of understands, but not really. Server traffic statistics are only really important to the top five leaderboard, where the ascended admins compete for influence. And the top five are pretty much set, after so many years of being the crossroads of the universe.

Unless Technoblade’s referring to one of the up-and-coming servers who’re trying to make a name for themselves. The faction lord gets a highly skilled warrior, and Technoblade’s server becomes renowned as being the one who produced said highly skilled warrior. Put that way, it’s a win-win situation all around.

Still. Phil trusts his instincts.

Phil finally manages to track down the faction lord once everything is said and done and the man is finally out of excuses to dodge his requests for a meeting.

“What’s this about Technoblade and a contract?”

“Oh? That old thing?” the man says, and chuckles. *Chuckles*, like this is a silly thing of little consequence. “I’m sorry to say, my friend, but you aren’t one of the parties involved. Confidentiality, you know.”

“I’m his adjutant,” Phil says. It’s not a card that he wants to play this early, but he’s been behind Technoblade’s shoulder as they both played strong-arm in this faction lord’s peace negotiations. If he doesn’t pull it now he’ll get stonewalled and then politely escorted out. “You made it my job to know everything that’s going on with him.”

“And you did a splendid job of it!” The faction lord reaches over to his wine bottle to pour them both a glass, and offers one to Phil like he’s just another ambassador or supporter to be placated with alcohol. “So? Will you continue to be, my fine friend? Or will you be on your merry way now that the war’s over?”

Phil takes an inordinate amount of pleasure declining the glass. “I’ll be taking my leave soon, but not before the job’s done. Does your contract with Technoblade have an end date?” Because he can’t imagine that a guy like Technoblade, whose name is spoken of with awe and fear in equal measure, would be satisfied with staying in a small-time server like this one.

“Again, I’m afraid I can’t tell you due to confidentiality.” The faction lord pauses, takes a sip of his wine. “But I will tell you, in the spirit of friendship—I plan on keeping him to his word.”

Not renegotiation. Not convincing Technoblade to stay. Just *keeping him to his word*, and Phil remembers nights spent pored over the maps, too; he doesn’t believe that Technoblade wouldn’t know the rules that govern the universe.

“All contracts must have a beginning and an end,” he quotes, and smiles when the faction lord frowns.

Phil spreads his wings and mantles them, lightens his steps, approaches slowly. He has no weapon in hand but he does not need any.

“Remember,” Phil murmurs, and does not grin when the faction lord pales and scrambles backward, his uncoordinated flailing knocking the wine to the floor. “I am here because you begged, and pleaded, and somehow convinced me that your cause was righteous. I’m sure that’s how you convinced Technoblade, too. But I am not bound, and neither is he.”

At that, the faction lord seems to catch his breath. He pushes back his shoulders and snarls back, “The Blade is here by contract.” One last attempt at maintaining dominance, even if they’re the only two people in the room and Phil is certainly not the one who is cowering away. “You can leave if you want, sure, see if I care! But you have no say in what happens concerning the Blade.”

“*Technoblade*,” Phil enunciates, “has the freedom to break that contract at any point he wants. You might be the lord of the server, but you’re no ascended admin; you can’t dictate if people join or leave.”

Phil has faced down the ender dragon before. The faction lord of a small LARP server, even the one that now technically rules the entire server, is nothing in comparison.

Phil runs into Technoblade in the hallway. He's leaning against the wall, still clad in his full diamond armor, nonchalant, bag packed and ready to go. He doesn't look surprised to see Phil here.

"Didn't really need you to do that," Technoblade says, but there's the faint expression that's his version of a smile on his face. And Phil—

"He was threatening," he says, very slowly, with rage still licking its way through his veins, "to keep you here. Under contract. Without your consent."

"He wanted—oh my gods." Technoblade snorts. He's outright smiling now, all sharp teeth and lion's grin, and he still doesn't seem to understand the seriousness of what could have just happened. "Under contract?"

"*Yes*, Techno—"

"Did he even *read* the contract?" Technoblade shakes his head. "I literally have like, six different break clauses in there."

That stops Phil in his tracks. "What?"

"Oh, he didn't tell you about that?" Technoblade peers at his face. "Wait, no, *you* didn't know about that either. Oh. Uh."

"Technoblade," Phil says carefully, leashing his temper because apparently he doesn't need it anymore. He considers his words, discards the first and second and third iterations of what he wants to say, because there is a time and place for indignation and it is not now. Eventually he manages, "Six break clauses?"

And evidently that's the right approach to take, because Technoblade starts happily chattering about it: "Yeah! Different ones for different circumstances—so like, I had one for not having enough munitions or supplies to win the war; if he ever didn't manage to pull that together I would've walked out on him for fightin' an impossible fight. I'm good but even I'm not *that* good enough to fight a war when people have empty stomachs, y'know?"

Right. Phil thinks about scrubbing his hands over his face, and then because he can he actually does. This is *Technoblade*. He has backup plans for his backup plans, every single one of them detailed and based in actual strategy, and he writes his personal notes in cyphers for fun. He can talk circles around Phil. He often *does* when a Lieutenant or Captain or even just a regular ballsy soldier decides that they want a public execution via verbal beatdown.

Why had he been worried?

And then Technoblade says, his smile audible: "Ah, uh, I gotta say—I gotta say, thank you though, Phil. I, uh, not sure if you noticed but social situations ain't exactly my strength. I prolly woulda done something ill-advised if he pushed the issue."

And, ah. Right. This is why.

“No problem, mate,” Phil says, and lifts his head from his hands to the sight of Technoblade quirking a half-smile at him. “Absolutely no problem at all. Let me know if there’s anyone else I need to talk to, alright?”

“Alright,” Technoblade repeats. He’s still smiling.

They start walking in silence. To where, Phil doesn’t know. But Technoblade seems to, and before long Phil’s recognized their winding path as one that takes them up to the castle wall.

“You seem to spend a lot of time here,” Technoblade notes as they step out into the chill. His tone is as deadpan as ever. “You like lookin’ at the sky?”

“And the horizon,” Phil admits.

Technoblade is silent for a moment. “There’s not much of the horizon back home,” he admits. “I mean, unless you go to the minigames with more open maps, I guess. Or SkyBlock. But—I mean—ugh.”

He scratches at the place where his mask meets his face. Phil’s wings are flat against his back but he pulls them in even closer, resists the urge to fidget.

Eventually Technoblade says, “Where’re you goin’ after this?”

Back to his own world, Phil almost says, before he pauses. He’d been looking forward to going home almost the entire war, but now that he’s here—well.

He’s finally found company that he likes, and he’s not sure if he wants to give it up just yet.

“Nowhere in particular.” Technoblade startles, looks over, and Phil gives him a wry smile. “I think I want to travel around a little more before I go back. Mind if I tag along when you go home?”

“You’re not going back to your singleplayer world?” the guy asks, instead of answering Phil’s question. And, well, it’s a fair rebuttal.

“I could, but mate, things get kinda lonely after years in hardcore by yourself.”

“What about communicators? Messagin’?”

“They’re good, but they’re not quite the real thing.” Phil shrugs. Laughs a little bit. If it’s more self-deprecating than wry then only he has to know. He won’t push Technoblade if the guy doesn’t want him there; far be it from Phil, the hardcore survivalist, to push someone for not wanting others in their space. But after weeks of being in the same cramped quarters, sharing the same worries and the same laughs, and after seeing the guy behind the myth—

Phil already has him on his communicator’s friends list, but he’s not quite ready to go back to being on his lonesome just yet.

“So, uh—mind if I—”

“Sure,” Technoblade interrupts, their sentences overlapping. He doesn’t seem to notice, instead pivoting on a foot to stare down at Phil with an actual grin on his face. “I’m always down for good company. And hey, I can show you around!”

“Yeah.” Phil returns the smile, rubs at the back of his neck. “That’ll be nice.”

But to do that they need to leave this server first. Technoblade’s already packed and ready to go from the looks of things, but Phil’s not quite ready yet. That’s easily fixed though.

They head down, ducking a majority of the castle crowd to do so. Technoblade walks Phil over to his bunk, and it’s quiet, but the good companionable kind of quiet that reminds Phil of peppermint tea in mugs and well-loved books with cracked spines about mythology.

“I’ll meet you at the server portal,” Technoblade says, and turns to leave.

“Alright, Technoblade, sounds good. I’ll see you there then!”

And then he pauses. Phil hesitates on his own doorstep, has to do a mental rewind to see if he’d said anything to cause that kind of reaction—

Technoblade says, watching out of the corner of his eye, his voice that deadpan evenness: “You can call me Techno, y’know.”

And—aw, hell.

Phil tries not to let too much of his heart show on his face, but he must fail because Techno turns away a little too quickly. He manages to make his, “Alright, Techno,” into something respectable, though.

On the day they leave the server, it’s sunny.

“Where are we going?”

“Hypixel,” Techno says, and then huffs a laugh. “Oh, they’re gonna love you, Phil, I just know it.”

What? “Who’s they?”

“Hypixel and the others.”

Hypixel is the name of a tournament-hub server whose coordinates Techno just punched in, but he doesn’t sound like he’s talking about the server—unless. *No.*

“Hypixel, as in the ascended admin of the server Hypixel?” Phil asks, half afraid and half some nameless surprise that hits right between the ribs.

“Who else?” Techno snorts, and then before Phil can continue panicking, the portal winks them away.

Chapter End Notes

Techno, hearing that this idiot lives eight armor bars down because he has elytra on instead of a proper chest plate: Well, I guess you need to be watched out for constantly now.

We're taking a detour, but don't worry. We'll be back to the war/militia setting soon enough. :)

"All contracts must have a beginning and an end" (as in, they need to have a start/end effective date; they cannot be indefinite) is my nerdy shout out to the fact that in computer code you need opening and closing brackets before compiling/running the code, else the environment/API/debugger will start yelling at you. (I swear I study CS at school guys)

to ask if there's been some mistake

Chapter Summary

Phil has a lot of questions, and finds answers to only some of them.

Chapter Notes

Mentioned admins are actual Hypixel admins, but they are characterizations of those people; this is not intended to be an accurate depiction of the IRL people.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They're practically mobbed as soon as they land. Techno doesn't seem bothered by it, just flicks his fingers, tips softly glowing. The familiar chill of the server rolls over Phil then, and he can't help the shiver.

"Sorry 'bout that," Techno says, as though what he's just done isn't significant in and of itself. "I, uh, usually go around nicked and intangible. We should be fine now, though."

Phil lifts his jaw from where it'd dropped. "How?"

"Hypixel and Noxy gave me a thing."

Hypixel again, and a name that he doesn't know. Phil debates asking who they are before he discards the idea. Instead he asks, "Where to now?"

Techno brightens and starts them off on a winding path. "Here's the main lobby," he says, and gestures to the bright and decorated information overload surrounding them both. Phil catches glimpses of crowded portals for *Bedwars* and *Skywars* and something even called *Party Games*, before Techno is bustling them away again. "You can get to pretty much everywhere else on the server from here."

"They're all portals?" Phil hasn't actually been on many tournament-hub servers before; he prefers quieter realms that are more—natural, per se, than the urban city sprawl this is turning out to be.

"Yup." Techno bobs his head, his course as sure as though he's following a compass. "We started off having just portals into lobbies, but then Hypixel got big, so then it turned into portals into *waiting realms* that threw you into lobbies for games. Got a whole system up and running and everything, the admin team spent a long time on that."

Phil isn't surprised. He hasn't even been able to look at the member roster by the server portal of who is in-world without it blinding his vision, there's that many people. "Where are we going, then? Another portal?"

"Yeah, if we can get there without—"

Techno doesn't get to finish. Even though they're intangible, even though they're *nicknamed* and no one should be able to recognize their faces without having their attention sliding off Phil and Techno like rain over waterproof wings, there is an equally transparent figure barreling down the crowded street like a minecart on powered rails.

Phil's stepping forward, hauling Techno back, covering him as much as he can on instinct. The human cannonball doesn't even seem to notice and flips over him, pivoting mid-air, to tackle Techno—

Who doesn't dodge it. He doesn't fight it, either, just laughs and opens his arms and folds the stranger into a hug. "Plancke!"

"You're here! Welcome back!" The stranger grins, all perfect bright teeth. "And who is *this*, Techno?"

"This here's Philza Minecraft." Techno untangles himself from the hug with a practiced movement that Phil's never seen before. His voice is soft and he looks amused, as though the bodily hug-tackle had just been another naïve attempt by a youngster in the ring trying to disarm him. "Phil, this is Plancke—they're one of the admins."

"Nice to meet you, Philza Minecraft!" Plancke beams, as though they are not one of the lynchpins that keep this universe nexus running. Their smile is just a little toothy. "You wouldn't happen to be *the* Philza Minecraft, known for his survivalist world, are you?"

"What, you *know* about him?"

"Yes," Phil answers, and smiles wryly when Techno shoots him a wide-eyed questioning look. "I'm flattered that you know me, sir."

Plancke flaps their hand, waving off the title. "Techno, don't tell me you brought home the legendary Philza Minecraft without knowing who he was!"

Techno—throws up his hands. This is the most expressive that Phil has ever seen him, and he's not afraid to admit that he's staring. "Plancke, you know me! I just stab people for coins and overthrow factions on smaller servers! I don't know anyone in the survivalist circles!"

"Terrible hospitality aside," Plancke snickers, "what're you doin', man? I thought you were gonna stay in the SMP circuit for a little while? Stretch your wings? Have a little fun?"

"Go conquer worlds," Techno adds dryly, and folds his arms across his chest. "Well, yeah, I was doin' that until recently. I think I'll stay home for a little while, Plancke."

"Oooh, goodie." Plancke puts an arm around Techno's shoulders and drags him in, even though the guy needs to hover two feet in the air to get high enough. "Hypixel'll be delighted

to hear that."

Phil glances around while the ascended admin Plancke continues on, and then almost does a double-take. Where just moments before there had been hundreds of thousands of people milling about, walking through their intangible forms, trying to get through to an active game, now there is no one.

"Did we get *teleported*?"

The others fall quiet. Phil realizes belatedly that he'd said that out loud. He does the only socially acceptable thing, which is give them a chagrinned smile and rub at the back of his neck. "Sorry, but, uh. Where did everyone go?"

"Oh, don't worry about that." Plancke's eyes gleam, and Phil recognizes that expression. "Techno, do you have a moment?"

Techno makes the same face as Plancke. "For a game of Bedwars? Always."

Phil learns two things: why Bedwars is such a popular game, and why Techno needs to go around nicked. Because even with it, people start yelling his name in the chat, telling themselves and others that he's here, apparently recognizing him off his habits alone. They freak out more about Techno than they do Plancke, who is an admin and one of the local deities and presumably the one they should be more afraid of.

Phil tightens his grip on his iron sword and watches as Techno rushes other teams with abandon, armed only with a wooden sword.

"Don't worry about it," Plancke tells him while Techno heads off to ruin Blue Team's day. They're leaning on their own sword, eyes set in the direction that Techno had gone, and their expression is fond. "Techno knows what he's doing. And hey, I wanted to get you alone to talk to you, so win-win!"

"You could have also just pulled me aside while Techno was playing the game on his own," Phil points out in what he feels like is a very reasonable tone.

It just earns him a sharp smile and a fireball, as one blooms to life between Plancke's fingers. They don't have enough emeralds for that one, Phil'd checked the prices on their base merchant's menu board. "Ah, but where's the fun in that? Moreover, I'm not just stalling Techno for a chat here, but also for the guys back home."

Back home—

"Yeah." Plancke outright laughs at him, a low giggle that sounds more like something an ascended admin would do than any of the other placid and pleasant conversation they'd made so far. "Hypixel and Noxy and CB noticed he made it through the portal, of course, and they're setting up a surprise dinner for him. I'm just here to make sure that Techno doesn't arrive before they get it all done."

That's sweet. Phil would tell Plancke so, except they still have a fireball between their fingers like it's a piece of paper. "…did Techno even tell you I was coming?"

That gets a reaction—Plancke snorts. "Of course he did. He's polite and mindful of things like that. He also told us all about you, Philza Minecraft, so I'm not gonna give you the shovel talk that Simon's probably gonna hit you with."

"Simon?"

"You'd know him as Hypixel," Plancke says, and at least they sound kind about it. Phil only registers that fact distantly, because apparently Techno is close enough with *the head ascended admin of the largest tournament-hub in the universe*, to call him by a personal name. And, apparently, for that same guy to give Phil a shovel talk.

But—"Why a shovel talk?"

"Techno… he, well, I presume you know how he is. He told us how long you've worked with him, but he's pretty unforgettable." Plancke shrugs, dismisses the fireball just to summon a slimeball, shimmering unmistakably with enchantments that they toss from hand to hand. "Techno doesn't make friends easily, so the fact that he made one that he's brought home, that he lets call him *Techno*—you caught the attention of a lot of people back home, Philza."

All of whom are, presumably, admins. Phil eyes Plancke's bloodthirsty smile, the same one that Techno wears when he wants to intimidate somebody, visible even with the skull mask, and he wonders how they'd take to the news of the faction lord that had driven them both off their last server. Probably not well.

Plancke must read something off Phil's face, because they nod to themselves and, without looking, slam a hand backwards. The slimeball connects, and Phil squints in the wind of a Knockback X enchanted item throwing somebody clean off their base island.

"I see you understand," Plancke says, no acknowledgement on their face that they'd just thrown an unsuspecting Bedwars player off the map with extreme prejudice or an item that is surely illegal under the rules of the game. "So let's get back to the game itself, shall we?"

They win the game. Of course they do: Technoblade had solo rushed and taken out the entire game by himself while Phil and Plancke had been chatting, and comes back to them after the game in high spirits, eyes bright.

Plancke smiles fondly up at Techno and gently places a golden crown on top of his head. "You'd left it behind," they say when Techno furrows his eyebrows in confusion. "Don't think CB's forgotten, you're getting an earful when we get home."

"Yeah, yeah." Techno smiles sheepishly, like he's getting scolded for forgetting gloves at home when the crown is shimmering with the kind of expensive enchantments that work even off-world and off-server—the kind of magic that runs straight through the veins of the universe. The kind of magic that hums in Phil's teeth and fills his ears with static, makes the hairs rise on the back of his neck.

Plancke is staring at him when Phil gets a hold of himself, eyes narrowed like they suspect that Phil knows. He smiles back, a little angry that they'd *let* Techno leave without an artifact like that.

"Techno," Plancke says, without looking away from Phil. "Where were you going, before I grabbed you?"

Techno scratches behind his ear. "Uhh, you know the apartments that Noxy set me up with? I have a couple of spare bedrooms, so I was gonna crash there with Phil tonight."

"Why don't you come up to the citadel?" Plancke jerks their head, indicating the castle in the sky. "You know Hypixel and the others will be all too happy to have you."

Techno shuffles on his feet. "I dunno, man, it's been a while since I've seen them and I know you guys were just talkin' about bein' busy with the new update, I don't want to bother 'em —"

"Techno."

Phil looks away, lets them have their moment. He's still close enough to hear: "Techno, you know you're never a bother."

"Yeah." A moment of silence, and then stronger: "Yeah. Alright."

Phil doesn't know what he should have been expecting, after Techno's masked but very clear uncertainty of bothering *the head ascended admin*, but it certainly hadn't been *this*.

"And *how* many kills did you get?"

"At least a hundred, over the course of my run!" Techno huffs, proud of himself, and grins wider than Phil's ever seen him. "Oh Simon, Simon, did I tell you—I did a one-v-twenty at one point—"

"You *did*?" The ascended admin punches the air. He's grinning widely enough that it must hurt. "Man, that's awesome!"

"Techno's Simon's favorite," Plancke murmurs to him, as they sit at the far end of the table and watch Hypixel listen raptly to Techno talking about his conquests like a proud parent. For all Phil knows, he *is*. "Techno started his run here with us early—god, has to be at least seven or eight years ago. He'd still been competing in Blitz then."

By Phil's guesstimate of Techno's age, that means Techno would have been seven years old. Phil tries to imagine a tiny Techno, younger and less experienced, grasping at wooden swords and charging at enemy teams across sky island maps. Unsurprisingly, he can. "How long have you known him, then?"

Plancke gives him a knowing look. "Seven or eight years. Kid's been around the Champion circuits for a while. And yet he lets you call him Techno."

It's taken longer than Phil had expected for them to bring it up. He shrugs, feels the ends of his elytra—in cloak form, not winged and not dismissed entirely in this unknown environment—twist with his worry. "We fought a war together."

"I see," they reply after a long moment, tone studiously neutral.

Phil picks at his dinner instead of replying. It's not bad at all. There's a lot more protein than he'd expected, but then again one of the other ascended admins had taken one look at Techno and started going off about him eating enough to be doing the kind of strenuous work that he preferred.

"He wasn't happy there, was he?"

Phil looks up. Plancke looks serious. Behind them the other admins are talking amongst themselves, or at least pretending to; after walking through subdued mess halls with the stares of dozens on his back, Phil recognizes an eavesdropping crowd when he sees one.

"What do you mean?" he asks, as though there can be any misunderstanding for this.

Plancke's expression doesn't change. "Philza. You know what I mean. Techno wasn't happy on the latest SMP he ended up at, was he?"

Phil glances over to check that, yeah, Techno's still thoroughly distracted. He's expressive, open, loose-limbed and content. He's not afraid. He's not anxious or stressed.

"He wasn't," Phil confirms, and says nothing when Plancke snarls under his breath. Behind him, beside him, the admins shuffle amongst themselves like a bristling pack of wolves.

Surrounded by so many people who love the guy, Phil wonders: why had Techno ever left?

"Hey, Bembo?"

"Five steps ahead of you, Plancke," someone answers, already tapping away at a panel of light. "I'll let you know when I dig up something."

Plancke nods and turns back to Phil. "You're welcome to stay however long you want," they tell him, and then laugh a little beneath their breath. "Not that I'm sure we could evict you, Mr. Angel of Death."

Phil can't help the instinctual rearing of his elytra-wings. "I'd never—"

"Not saying that you would." Plancke smiles, but it's sharp. "Just a warning. Techno might not have recognized you, but we do."

There is a moment, surrounded by people who must have raised Technoblade—taught him how to fight, maybe, or watched his tournaments and gave him tips and let him loose on the rest of the universe—where Phil is indignant. They don't know him. They know his reputation and his monikers, but they don't know *him*.

“Techno is my *friend*.” Phil flares his wings, just a little. Not enough for Techno to notice where he’s still deep in earnest, energetic conversation with the head ascended admin, but enough to force Plancke to lean back or be smacked in the face. “Just because I’m no longer his adjutant and we’re no longer in war doesn’t mean that’s changed.”

Plancke regards him for a long moment—their eyes glow and server static fills Phil’s ears—and then the moment breaks, and Plancke laughs, and they lean in to clasp Phil on the shoulder. “Ha, here I am, giving you a shovel talk when I told you I wouldn’t give you one!”

He’s smiling and obviously not offended by the threat display. Phil still relaxes slowly, still wary. “Yeah, mate, what was that about?”

Plancke shrugs. “Habit, I suppose. Simon’s usually busy with other things, and well—like you said. Techno’s your friend. There’s a lot of people who’ve claimed to be so, and none have measured up to the title so far. But you?”

It’s not just Plancke who give Phil considering looks this time. Bembo does the same, and so do a handful of other admins in the room who drop the innocent totally-not-eavesdropping act.

“We’re looking forward to seeing you around, Philza.”

“I appreciate it,” Phil replies as dryly as he can, and only smirks a little when Plancke giggles. “Ah, mate—can I ask you something?”

“Sure, sure.” Plancke sighs and leans back in their seat, out of wing-smack range. “What is it?”

“Why—” Phil hesitates, bites his lip, rephrases his question. “Techno told me that he was fighting at the last SMP server we were at under contract.”

And Plancke—they *still* at that, and Phil has to physically resist the urge to spring out of his chair. They are no longer someone idling at dinner; they’re an admin, bled and proven.

Quietly Plancke asks, “Contract?”

Techno hadn’t consulted them about it then, which means he’d worked in the break clauses by himself. Phil can’t exactly say that he’s surprised.

But he’s still got an admin—a whole room full of admins, honestly—waiting for an answer. “A contract: Techno would fight for a faction on the server, in return for the side he’d helped opening up the server portals when the war was over.”

Plancke hisses out a breath, mutter something low and vicious under their breath. “Of course he would have done that. *Of course* he would have.”

“Shouldn’t be surprised—”

“He did this last year, too—”

“Did Simon’s speech not get through to him?”

“It must not have.” Plancke eyes Phil with something in their eye that he doesn’t understand. “But you wouldn’t tell us just to tell us, would you?”

They’ve got him pegged. Phil inclines his head. “So he does this often.”

“Ever since he started the SMP circuit, he’s been working to build up Hypixel’s name, yeah.” Plancke grimaces. “I think it’s habit at this point? He joined us when we weren’t even top fifty.”

Phil whistles lowly. He’d known of Hypixel’s meteoric rise, of course, but this puts it in perspective. They might have known Techno since before his reputation had grown, but he’d have known them before they became known throughout the universe as *the* tournament-hub server.

Techno might have known these admins before they’d ascended. No wonder they’re so protective of him.

The first day Techno’s back at Hypixel is, apparently, a server-wide affair.

“Yeah, I, uh,” Techno starts. He doesn’t finish his sentence, just scratches at his ear and smiles sheepishly under his skull mask.

Phil snorts to himself and shakes his head. “You’re kinda famous?”

“…guess you could say that, yeah.”

Kinda doesn’t even cover it. News has gotten out that Hypixel’s reigning Champion is in residence, and there’s already pink flags hung throughout the main lobby. Phil’s lost count of the number of people who have a bright red cloak in honor of Techno, let alone the ones who are shouting excitedly to each other about the blood god.

Techno tilts his head, his crown gleaming in the light. The hum of magic has died down into something that Phil can ignore. “I’m probably gonna have to show up in a few more games of Bedwars,” he admits. “Gotta keep my name strong, y’know?”

“Bedwars? Not the free-for-all melee matches?”

“Nah.” Techno rolls his head around, does his little stretch that never fails to remind Phil of a predatory feline. “Got plenty of those while we were on the SMP. I kinda want to punch somebody off the map today, y’know?”

Phil had watched the highlights clip afterwards, of Techno sheathing his wooden sword to bodily shove people off the narrow wool bridge. “I’ll pack you lunch.”

Techno stills, the way he does when he’s narrowing his eyes at Phil beneath the skull mask. Phil carefully doesn’t think about how he hasn’t seen Techno take it off here unless he’s at the citadel, the same way he’d worn it everywhere throughout their last week on the SMP.

“Sure,” Techno says after a moment. He still sounds a little suspicious. The humming intensifies, just a little. “But Phil, you know how to *cook*?”

“Pretty decently.” There’s no mess halls in singleplayer survival worlds, and Phil’s gotten good at making palatable meals from almost nothing. With the free reign that Plancke had given Phil of the citadel’s kitchen, he’s pretty damn sure he can make something nice for Techno to take with him. “Do you have any preferences?”

“Oh, man, don’t ask me about *preferences*.” Techno laughs a little. “Uh, just, whatever’s easiest is fine. You don’t gotta go out of your way for me Phil, whatever you’re havin’ for lunch should be good.”

It’s not going out of my way, Phil wants to say. You’re the one who’s eating it.

Instead he says, “Something with some meat in it then. Have fun out there, alright, mate?”

Thousands crowd the main lobby, watching the match on the large screens that usually depict advertisements, and from where he’s cleaning up the detritus of lunch in the citadel kitchen, Phil watches them watch the livestream of Techno’s Bedwars matches. Because that’s apparently something that Hypixel does.

“He’s the blood god,” a passing admin snickers at him when Phil makes the mistake of wondering out loud just how many people there are elbowing each other down in the square. “Have you heard them chanting for him?”

Phil has; they’re loud enough to be heard even in the sky. *Blood for the blood god*.

“He’s earned it fair and square,” the admin says. They—she?—sound fond. “Did he ever talk about it with you?”

“Nope.” Phil feels… oddly disappointed by that. He shakes his head to himself and returns to putting sandwich ingredients away. “But, ah. If you don’t mind me asking—”

“Shoot,” the admin says. She leans against the wall instead of continuing on with wherever she’d been going. She’s still smiling.

Phil thinks about Techno, his absolute ease around weaponry, the way he’d never taken his armor off back in the SMP, the swiftness with which he armors up. Tournament-hub lobbies don’t allow combat nor weapons, but Techno has to at least have operator powers if he can *nickname* people. The mask, which doesn’t seem to inhibit his line of sight; the crown, which he’d left here and that an ascended admin had held onto for him until he could be crowned.

He picks the most innocuous question he has: “How old is he?”

He’s expecting an incredulous look, maybe a tease or two. He’s not expecting the admin to *laugh*. “Well, his birthday’s coming up soon!”

Wait, *what*?

“Though, we’re not exactly sure how the whole—” the admin waves a hand, nonchalant and apparently unaware of the fact that she’s just broken Phil’s brain. “—you know, *blood god* deification process is messing with his age, so, uh. He’s turning fourteen if we’re going by Hypixel’s frame of reference.”

“But—” Phil shuts the refrigerator door with a little too much force, but he can’t find himself to care. “He looks like he’s fifteen?”

“Like I said.” The admin shrugs. “Hypixel’s frame of reference. Also, he’s always looked older than he is, even when he was just starting out with us.”

Phil leans on the refrigerator himself. Stares at nothing for a little while.

“So?” he hears, when he’s gotten his brain back on track. The admin is grinning without remorse. “You gonna help us put together his birthday party?”

And without hesitation Phil replies: “*Absolutely*.”

Chapter End Notes

On the other hand, Plancke with the Knockback X slimeball is a true fact.

In a world where some people don't really have last names, how meaningful is it to be allowed use of a personal name or a nickname? :D

My writing playlist for this fic is also now up on Spotify, if you're interested in that kind of thing.

spit the bones from between your teeth

Chapter Summary

Phil recognizes that he may be in over his head, but in his defense, Techno is a friend that he wants to *keep*.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The admin who'd told Phil about Techno's birthday—Robity, apparently—helps him put a small party together. "It's not public to the server," she admits. "They know this year is Techno's fourteenth, but they don't know the exact date of his birthday. Even when he'd been younger, he was worried about his privacy."

Admins and moderators come and go, dropping off supplies, eyeing Phil with curiosity. He doesn't let it bother him as he continues to pack Techno lunch every morning and waves him off to a Bedwars or Skywars or regular Championship tournament, before returning to the planning.

His attempts to probe Techno's favorite foods—not just the ranking system of what he prefers from a mess hall, but *actually* favorite foods—come up short. "He eats whatever you put in front of him," Robity says with no little amusement. "I wouldn't be so worried over your judgement."

Plancke is similarly unhelpful: "Uh… sandwiches? He's been eating the ones you've been packing for him."

Which is apparently also a fact that *all* the admins know about. Phil is reminded of an old grandmother's knitting circle, the kind where they all know how to use needles for more than just yarn. They gossip without even looking down at their work, their gazes shrewd.

Their craftsmanship is as equally as honed as that knitting circle, too—over the course of the week, Phil tours exquisitely crafted sky islands, lovingly detailed pirate ships, even a small world-within-a-world that feels like a microcosm of Wynncraft. They're all hand-built block by block. They've certainly earned their reputation and status as the best and most popular tournament-hub server many times over.

And somehow between the duties of worldcrafting that Phil remembers from his own world as one that never ends, they craft their own gifts for Techno. They're little trinkets that fold and unfold in interesting ways; a collection of original, hand-transcribed books instead of the more common digital files distributed through the library servers. Most of the admins, though, throw in on a group gift: a cloak.

It's Plancke who shows him why, passing a hand over the hem of it to reveal the tightly-sewn embroidery. "Not as extensive as we'd like it to be," they say, with a grimace that says they're dissatisfied even when there are enough enchantments crammed into it that Phil can feel the heat. "But then again, CB's standards are set by Techno's crown, and there's no way we're going to be able to match that."

"Why not?" Phil asks, because surely a server full of ascended admins who love Technoblade could recreate what must have been their finest work.

"The crown's something else," Plancke says with a wry smile, and refuses to say any more. Alright, then. Trade secrets or something equally as dangerous to share it is.

Either way, it looks heavy and warm, and hums with the kind of magic that means it's made with love. Phil can't find a fault with it, even if Plancke and CB and some of the other admins look frustrated with it and mutter about it *not being good enough*. He doesn't understand.

But then again, Techno must be practically family to them, and *that* kind of anxious gift-giving is one that Phil is more familiar with.

Techno's actual birthday dawns slow and quiet.

He's still rubbing at his eyes when he appears in the citadel's largest common room, crown askew in his hair, and Phil doesn't bother hiding his smile as he reaches over to help straighten it. "Got a good night's sleep, mate?"

"I did," Techno says, yawning wide enough that Phil can see his back teeth. "You?"

Phil had ended up staying up to put the last finishing touches on what's supposed to have been a lowkey party, but Techno doesn't need to know that. "Yeah, I did."

"Oh, good." Techno yawns again, and then blinks. And blinks some more.

Phil doesn't know why the admins had left him alone for this part, but at least Techno hadn't needed to walk into this alone and confused. "Yeah, uh, do they always go out like this?"

"It's a compromise," Techno grumbles, even as he shakes his head and makes his way over to the couch where a mound of blankets is waiting for him already. "I don't like to make a big deal outta it, but they still wanna do things, so they try to spread it out over the course of the day."

And Techno just—proceeds to stay there for most of the day. Phil sits with him since he doesn't have any duties to a universe nexus nor shifts to ensure that it remains stable, and he watches as ascended admins come and go. They drop by to wish Techno a happy birthday.

Techno chats with them, laughs with them, and watches them go back to their work with something in his eyes that Phil doesn't have a name for.

"And that's the last of them until dinner," he says, as the lunch hour tapers off and they're left alone. Techno brushes his hands over the blanket and eyes the table and its gift-wrapped

boxes, before he turns to look at Phil again. “Please don’t tell me they roped you into the gift parts of the event.”

Phil would absolutely have helped in the cloak enchanting if the admins had let him. Understandably, they guard their enchantments like the Ender dragon guards her egg. As it is, he has a different gift he’d helped make. “Nope. Why, you don’t like ‘em?”

“No, no, it’s not that, it’s just,” and here Techno laughs, soft and fond. He’s so relaxed here, loose-limbed, doesn’t wear armor, hardly carries his weapons, just wraps himself up in blankets and leaves his crown askew and isn’t efficient about wiping the sleep from his eyes. Phil sometimes feels as though he is witnessing something that should be guarded jealously. “They can get pretty extra and gung-ho about it. Don’t want you to get stuck in one of Plancke and CB’s screaming matches, when they get into it.”

An entire community’s worth of people who’ve made it their life’s work to maintain and operate a tournament-hub like Hypixel? Yeah, Phil can see them being as passionate about the mundane parts of spellwork as some of Techno’s more fanatic fans.

“An’ you didn’t have to get me anything.” Techno squints at him, a little bleary-eyed, but the sharp intellect that had won them wars lingers, waiting for an opening. “You know that, right? I’m just happy t’have you here. No gifts required.”

“Riiight,” Phil answers, drawing out the word, and smiles when Techno frowns. “I’ll give you gifts if I want to, Techno.”

His friend grumbles, but sinks further into his blankets. “Oh, fine, if you insist,” he says, but Phil recognizes the pleased undercurrent to his voice. “Can I ask what it is?”

Phil would laugh, but he’s still nervous. He hadn’t sought any of the admins’s approval for this, but Techno had known that wings—elytra—are from the universe, not from an accident of nature like some players mistakenly think, so surely he’ll know what the gesture will mean.

“It’s a two-parter,” Phil says. “The first will appear during dinner.”

Techno snorts, loud and ugly and unafraid to be so. “Alright, fine. And the second?”

“I’ll give you the second after everyone else is gone,” *when it’s just the two of us*.

Techno blinks, slowly, curiously. “Why not now?”

“Now?”

“Yeah. No one is gonna show up for a little bit—usually I keep myself busy until everyone except the rotating skeleton crew can get here. A little bit of Bedwars, a little bit of Skywars, helping them playtest and see if I can’t kick up any bugs.”

And, well. Techno has a point.

“You sure?” Phil squints, exaggerated and teasing, and muffles a snicker when Techno makes a face. “You’re gonna have to stay awake for it.”

Techno surfaces from his blankets with a controlled flail. “Alright, fine, I will. Now tell me.”

Phil spreads a wing, drapes it over Techno’s lap, does his best to keep his breathing even. He mostly succeeds. “Would you like to help me preen my wings?”

Techno stills, hands held carefully up and away. “Are you sure?” He’s pressed all amusement out of his voice, leaving only solemnness behind.

Yeah. Phil’d been right. Techno knows what this means.

“I’m sure,” he says, and leans back into the couch as Techno starts straightening vanes.

Everyone—or, well almost everyone, if Techno and Plancke and Robity are to be believed—shows up at the dinner hour. They pull down the hidden decorations from the common room and laugh when Techno grumbles good-naturedly about missing a surprise hidden right under his nose. They pass out food and drink and settle down in groups of two and four, but not before wishing Techno a happy birthday one more time.

People that Phil doesn’t know show up, too. They’re not admins, they don’t have the raw electric feeling of server magic hanging around them, but they have the same dangerous feeling that Techno’d had on the field, and they’re allowed to carry weapons in the citadel.

“Skeppy couldn’t make it,” Techno says when Phil asks him about it. There’s a twist to his smile that Phil hasn’t seen before, but the line of his shoulders is soft. “He’s busy poppin’ off, doin’ his own thing. But TapL’s here, and so is Calvin, and me and Fruit are supposed to call sometime tomorrow.”

TapL and Calvin are two names that Phil hasn’t heard before, but they seem to know Techno well if the way they immediately kidnap him for conversation is any indication. Phil watches it happen, curious, and wonders if the martial combat community is anything like the survivalist’s.

Cake happens somewhere after that. Robity declares that she and Phil had made it together to the applause of the room, and Techno turns around, eyes wide and wordless asking if it’s true.

Phil smiles back in answer. He’s no professional baker, but that cake is some of the best work he’s done in a long while and he’s pretty proud of it.

“Did you give Techno one of your feathers?”

Phil turns around in his seat. Plancke leans against a nearby wall, eyes narrowed. They don’t look at Phil directly, but the air hums around them in harmonics that Phil hasn’t heard in years, audible even over the babble of the crowd excited for cake.

“I did.”

Plancke's eyebrows rise, up and up and up. "Techno's a smart cookie. He knows what it means." They slant a look at him. Unspoken is: *Do you?*

Phil snorts. "It fell out when he was preening my wings," he tells the admin, and because he is a good person he doesn't laugh when Plancke does a double take.

"He—you let him—"

"Preen, yeah."

"*Philza Minecraft*," Plancke hisses. They make a half-strangled gesture, hands clawing the air, then drop them. "You—I can't even!"

"Look," Phil says, because Plancke is wide-eyed and starting to look a little frayed at the edges, and because he doesn't want to be rightfully accused of driving someone into a nervous breakdown. "I was at the end of my rope, trying to get a birthday present for *Techno*, okay? You guys made him a *cloak*—how am I supposed to even compare to that?"

Plancke grabs him by the shirt and pulls him close. "So you offered to let him preen for—for a—a fuckin' birthday present?"

And that, there, is genuine offense and indignation shrieking on the higher tones. Phil lowers his voice, drops the act, does everything he can to come across as sincere and absolutely does not wince. "It was really convenient timing, but I was always going to ask him to help."

Plancke stares, and their eyes are filled with burning stars. "You better not be saying that just to be saying that."

"I'm not."

A moment passes. Two. Plancke lets him go to run both hands through their hair, and Phil releases a breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding.

"Everything alright?" a voice says from behind him, and Phil falls out of his chair. Simon Hypixel, head ascended admin of the top five tournament-hub server named after him, catches him mid-fall and sets him back in it with a gentle hand. He doesn't let go afterwards.

"Yeah," Plancke answers, while Phil is busy trying to breathe properly. Their voice is perfectly even, with no lingering harmonics or overtones. "We're all good."

Hypixel glances over at Techno, who is handily distracted by a Robity insisting that he cut pieces for the admins, and Phil wonders how much of the last few minutes have been a set up.

"He has your feather in his hair."

"To be fair, that was Techno's idea." Phil is the one sitting while Plancke and Hypixel are standing, and yet he doesn't feel at ease at all. He pushes down the feeling, tries to ignore it. "But if what you're asking is, did I help braid it? Then, yeah, I did."

Hypixel turns his head slowly. Phil is reminded of an owl, wide-eyed and wise and a whisper-silent predator.

“You stayed with him,” Hypixel says, quietly enough that Phil needs to lean in to hear. “It’s a rare man who would stay for something more than glory-seeking.”

“He’s my friend,” Phil tells him, because what else is there to say?

Hypixel nods like that answers everything. “You gave him one of your feathers.”

From wings gifted by the universe, yes. Phil knows what this looks like. He tilts up his chin, stares Hypixel in the eye.

The admin—smiles.

“You’re welcome to visit Hypixel whenever.” He squeezes Phil’s shoulder surprisingly gently, before he finally lets go. “Now come on. If we don’t move fast, CB is going to eat all the cake.”

“They’re admins,” Techno tells Phil, when the last of them are gone and it’s just them, sitting on the couch. “They love this server. They love this world. And don’t get me wrong, I love Hypixel too! I practically grew up here.”

He pauses, thoughtful. Phil gives him a moment, but Techno is staring at the wall, eyesbrows creased in the way that means there’s still more on his mind. Eventually he prompts, “But?”

“But it’s not… *mine*, you know.” Techno sighs, quiet and somber. “They found purpose here. They love creating new games, watching over the ones already made, making sure everyone who visits has a good time. They might get stressed out sometimes over an up-and-coming server who’s threatening the server leaderboard, but they don’t that often anymore.”

Hypixel and Plancke and CB and Robity and the others have all found their callings here, and yet Techno has not. Phil remembers *deification* and *strongest player on the server* and *Champion of Hypixel*, and wonders how much of the reason why is because of the pressure.

“So, y’know, they’re always worried when I go wandering off.” Techno huffs. “But I always text, and they always update me with whatever’s happening at home, so it works.”

“Do you come back for your birthdays?” Phil asks, because the timing really had been very convenient.

“Eh, I try to. Simon insists on it, anyway.” Techno scratches at an ear, squints thoughtfully out the window. It is always cloudless here, day and night, and Phil wonders just how they’d managed that, or if they have a schedule for rain and snow. “And it’s no trouble at all, so.”

Which means that no matter what happens in the next year—if Techno decides that he’s off to a world where Phil can’t follow, or if the call of home becomes too much for Phil himself—they can always see each other again on Techno’s birthday, here at Hypixel. It’s reassuring in more ways than one.

“But, hey, uh.” Techno laughs a little, nudges Phil’s knee with a socked foot. “Thanks. I liked havin’ you here. Did you have a good time?”

It’d been his own birthday, and Techno is still playing the part of a gracious host. Phil looks at the shimmering feather tucked into Techno’s crown of braids, peeking out from behind the golden crown, and says without remorse, “I did.”

“’cause I think I remember Simon cornering you at one part of the night—during cake, right?”

Phil blinks. Techno’s gaze is steady and certain. Cyphers and stratagems, Phil remembers; and Plancke had mentioned other people claiming to be Techno’s friend before. How many of them had gotten the shovel talk from Hypixel? How many hadn’t even reached him, and had met their matches in Plancke instead?

But what Phil tells Techno is, “He came over to remind Plancke and I to grab a plate of cake.” Not because he doesn’t want Techno to know, but because Techno and Phil’s friendship is their business alone; and Hypixel had hardly done any threatening, anyway.

Techno pauses. Phil wonders if he’s gotten away with it. Then Techno smirks—the confident one that says *I know what you’re doing*, and oh, damn, now Phil knows how it feels to be on the other side of Techno in a sparring ring—before he says, “Oh, ‘cause of CB?”

Phil takes the out while the going’s good. “Yeah. Does he just eat everything when no one is looking?”

“All that deep programming uses up a lot of brainpower, man. The dev admins are just like that.”

They take a breather for the next little while. Techno video calls Fruit, goes out to spar a couple of rounds with TapL and Calvin, drags the infamous Skeppy into a few Bedwars games that even Phil ends up watching on the broadcast.

Phil would feel bad for the last guy, but, well. Apparently he’s old friends with Techno, and so he really should have seen it coming. Phil ends up laughing harder at those two’s antics than he has at anything in recent memory.

It reminds him, too, that Techno is only fourteen by the best guesses of an entire server’s admin community. He might actually be older; he might be younger. Phil doesn’t actually know—Techno knows so much, behaves maturely, regards the world with the kind of weary, accepting gaze that he’d last seen in the survivalist and builder’s circles: the folks who’ve had their adventures years ago, and have since settled down to make something that lasts.

But he’s still Techno. Still the Commander that Phil had met by sheer chance, and still the fearsome warrior whose mind is as equally sharp as, if not sharper than, his sword arm.

“Hey, that’s neat.”

“What?” Phil blinks himself back to awareness, looks over. Techno is squinting at his communicator. He’s got his reading glasses on.

“I got invited to a new tournament series. Run by a player looking to make a name for themself and their server. They’re named… Keemstar?”

“Never heard of the dude.” Phil cracks his neck, rolls his shoulders. Long idle periods of doing nothing but sightseeing and playing the minigames does get boring after a while. Not that Techno or the admins have been anything but gracious, just—

He’d earned the moniker that Plancke had called him out on for his own reasons, too.

“Well, you wanna go and watch me compete?” Techno grins at him, all glee and sharp teeth. “There’s supposed to be some bigshot names there, including people who’re from the farside of the universe.”

Phil straightens, turns. Techno hands over the communicator without protest or prompting.

It’s a mix of names that Phil does and doesn’t know, but some stand out immediately: “Captain Sparklez?” And oh, damn—“*Fit*?”

“Yeah!” Techno bounces up to his feet, doing the little forward-backward movement he does when he’s loosening up his muscles. Phil understands the excitement. “Also those farside universe people, but who cares about xQc and M0xyy, right?”

“Right,” Phil snickers. “We only care about nearside people here.”

“Only the best and truly OG Players for us.”

“None of that new-game trash they’re trying to play.”

They grin at each other. Techno bobs his head and starts rambling excitedly about the others who are attending, their names, their infamy, their projected skill level. Phil plants his cheek on his fist and listens, enraptured.

“Hey, hey,” Techno says mid-speech about the Captain’s latest championship stats. “Do you want me to ask if I can bring you? Or if you can compete? Seems like this Keemstar’s only prerequisite is that the competitors be big names or be someone who can bring in lots of attention to their small server, and hey, if we can team, we could probably sweep it.”

“Sure,” Phil answers on autopilot, and then more confidently when he mentally catches up: “Yes. Absolutely.”

“’cause Skeppy’s going with some guy named BadBoyHalo, and hey, that means Keemstar can’t say anythin’ if we—oh, yeah?”

Techno blinks slowly, caught mid-thought process. Phil muffles another snicker. “Yeah.”

“Oh, we’re gonna get kicked out *so fast*, Phil.”

“It’ll be worth it, though.”

Techno leans to one side, cocks a hip, tips his head into a nod. The crown glitters on his head. Phil flutters his wings, and the feather in Techno’s hair shimmers, casts a little stardust. “It’s gonna be *great*.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a little more of this detour, ~~chat~~ y'all, and then we're back to the Antarctic Empire plot. :D

Farside universe are just people who aren't mainly Minecraft YouTubers/streamers. Nearside means folks like Technoblade, Philza, Captain Sparklez, and FitMC: people who produce mostly/all Minecraft content.

coming back to cities I feel loved in

Chapter Summary

> It’s a beautiful day on the tournament server, and they are terrible people. Or at least Phil’s fairly sure that’s what the rumors are going to be when they're done.

Chapter Notes

> Canonizing Minecraft Monday is a little tricky, since none of the participants were RPing during those competitions. So please take these characterizations as what they are—characterizations—instead of a portrayal or judgement of the actual streamers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They don’t leave immediately. Techno shows the competition invite to Plancke, who passes it to Bembo, who shows it to Robity, and so on and so forth until Phil’s pretty damn sure that they’ll never get to go before Techno’s intimidating-as-hell family grills this Keemstar person over a fire.

But eventually the admins saddle them up with provisions and gear, even though Techno is sighing. “None of this is gonna work, you know that, Plancke,” he’s telling the admin’s head, where it’s practically tucked under his chin.

Plancke continues to fuss with the cloak-clasp. “You don’t know that.”

“Uh, yeah, I actually *do* know that. You’re the one who taught me the finer points about server magic and what’s universal and what’s not.”

Phil blinks. He looks up from where he’s double-checking his things, one last time, to stare at the two of them.

The admin is scowling, now, even as they pat Techno’s cloak into place over his shoulders. “Don’t get sassy with me,” they grumble, and frown even harder when Techno huffs out a laugh. “I’m serious! And you never know!”

“Plancke,” Techno says, ever patient, “we’re going to a specially built tournament world. They’re not gonna allow anything in the arena that they haven’t specifically placed, anyways—it’s not allowed.”

“And after that?”

Techno's always moving, at least a little. He only completely stills when he's in a fight, when he's braced over a war map like a predator, when there is something else catching his attention and holding it.

He's that coldly still now, and Phil checks the exits and their blind spots on habit, on reaction, before he catches himself.

"After what?"

"And after the competition? We know you." Plancke sounds—kind about that, at least, if a little wry. "You're gonna be gone to the next adventure. You never come straight back here anymore, and—no, shush," they add, pre-empting a Techno who's opened his mouth. "I'm not saying it's a bad thing."

Techno squints. He doesn't prompt, doesn't get defensive, just waits. Patient.

Phil eyes the walls and wonders if he's supposed to be here.

Eventually Plancke says, "Oh, don't worry about it. I'll just tell Philza here to watch out for you, now shall I?"

"What?" Phil blinks, shuffles on his feat, startled and surprised. "What've I got to do with this, mate?"

"You're bringing *Phil* into this?" Techno asks at the same time, amused and a little indignant. "You know you can just tell me these things!"

"We've told you that we don't need you arranging for more server traffic on our behalf. Bembo's already gone and explained it to you—*three* times!—that we're doing a lot better! That we have been for years!"

Plancke smacks Techno on the shoulder, more lovetap than a gentle one. It doesn't even rock him, but they don't seem to notice or care, just puts both hands on their hips and huffs.

"Even Simon's given you this talk," they say, and Techno—winces, beneath that mask.

Oh. "It's Techno," Phil interrupts, and smiles when Plancke whirls around on him like he's the one who's going to unnecessary lengths on behalf of a server that doesn't need it. "Of course he's going to go over the top for people he cares about."

Techno comes back to life at that, folding his arms across his chest. "See? Phil gets it! And you never know, right—"

"We are *literally* sitting pretty at the number one spot." Plancke drags a hand down their face. "There is no server that's going to come *close* to ousting us without us seeing it coming."

Phil would be more sympathetic if Techno's shoulders weren't slumped, his stance ready and battlefield-solid. But then again, he understands Plancke and the admin's side of this too—Techno really *does* go over the top, sometimes.

“A compromise,” he proposes, and carefully does not flinch when admin and champion both turn to him. They move in synchronization, mirror each other without even seemingly trying, and he takes a moment to wonder: *Will we be like that one day?*

And then he shakes himself out of it, because Techno is staring at him now with something like relief on his face.

“You’re worried that Techno’s going to go and find himself a contract—his combat skills in return for exposure for Hypixel, correct?”

“Not just exposure,” Plancke clarifies. “Server links opening up again. Specific trade and mutual aid agreements that’ll be in Hypixel’s favor. I swear to the universe, Techno, you’d take over Robity’s job for her if she’d let you.”

“Never,” Techno immediately replies, and at least there’s some humor back in his voice now instead of genuine confusion. “I can’t do her job, talkin’ with people all day, alright? I’ve got one trick and that’s it.”

Techno is the farthest thing there is from a one trick pony, but Phil bites down on the retort. Plancke does too—so the deflection and distraction isn’t a recent avoidance tactic, then. Good to know.

“So after this tournament, we’ll go do something fun. I don’t know what yet,” Phil adds, before Plancke can start grilling *him* for details. “But I swear it won’t be more of Techno working himself to the bone on someone else’s benefit.”

“I do *not*,” Techno mutters under his breath.

“You do.”

“Absolutely not.”

“The faction lord from our last server,” Phil points out dryly, “and *how* long were you there, exactly?”

Techno presses his lips together. He doesn’t answer. Phil looks to Plancke, but the admin’s got their face buried in their hands. “We don’t know, because *someone* only ever messages back once a month and also didn’t tell us how long he was dealing with people being rude to him.”

“They weren’t *rude*, per se.”

And Phil has absolutely no trouble contesting that, at least. “They were absolutely rude.”

“*Anyway*.” Techno shakes his head, shuffles on his feet. He slings his pack higher on his shoulder. “You all ready to go, Phil?”

Plancke looks mulish, but even as an avoidance tactic Techno’s got a point. If they linger any longer they’re going to be late rather than on time to the tournament.

“I am,” Phil says, and resettles his own pack on his shoulders. He’s already done and ready to go himself—he hadn’t brought all that much with him onto the LARP server, and anyway he tends to travel light. The most additional weight he’ll have to carry are a handful of glimmering data crystals of builds on Hypixel that he’d liked and that the admins had been kind enough to pass him the architectural plans for. Phil’s rather looking forward to trying them out back home.

“No you’re not.” Plancke shakes their head and gestures Phil closer. “Get over here, Mr. Minecraft.”

There’s something glittering in their hand. Phil pauses, surprised and confused, and Plancke takes the opportunity to lean forward and pin a cloak clasp over his heart.

“Simon gave you the invitation,” they say, and pat Phil on the shoulder. “That’ll give you portal access to the citadel. Keyed to you specifically, mind, so don’t be a stranger, alright?”

Portal access to the citadel of *Hypixel*?

“Oh, neat,” Techno says, thankfully buying Phil time to figure out how the hell he’s supposed to respond to *that*. “Hey, that means you have no reason to *not* come back to Hypixel. You really should try out the games, I’m telling ya.”

“We’ll need to play a game at some point.” Phil shakes his head, resettles, and holds out a hand to Plancke with a smile. “I’m honored. Until then, I’ll take good care of it.”

Plancke snorts again, shakes their head. “Nah, man, it’s for you to keep. You both have fun out there, alright?” They grin, and ah, there it is, an ascended admin’s fae whimsy. “We’ll be rooting for the both of you.”

And then they’re waving a hand, and Techno is reaching out for Phil’s, and the void of the universe swallows them up.

The server that Keemstar’s invited their contestants to is surprisingly solid. It has the sheen of a newly birthed world, of course—the too-bright colors and too-blocky shapes are distracting enough that Phil half-wants to drop out of the tournament just to coax the world from immediate post-creation stage into something older—but the buildings are opaque, the dirt path beneath their feet is neat and orderly.

Techno lets go of Phil’s hand to squint into the sun, and Phil breathes in slowly through the sudden loss. It’s just a hand. It’s just Techno, and yet—

No, it’s not ‘just’ Techno. It’s Techno, the first new friend that Phil has wanted to keep, and he has *got* to get this under control. Just because Phil has issues keeping friends through his bouts of solo adventuring doesn’t mean that Techno does too.

“What do you think?” Techno asks, and Phil shakes himself aware. “Spot any of the competition yet?”

The invitation list—and the competition roster—had listed some big names in the combat circuit. Phil lets Techno take him by the elbow and tug them both off the portal platform, making way for the next people to arrive. There's not a lot of people here yet, and at least, no one that Phil knows.

"None of the people we marked out yesterday."

Techno grunts, bobs his head. "Yeah, I was thinkin' the same thing. So what first, d'you think? Get settled in before we schmooze?"

Oh, Phil knows that leading tone. "You mean while I talk and you hover in the background."

That earns him a smile, half-self aware and chagrinned, half-extremely amused. "Ain't my fault you're better at talkin' to strangers than I am."

"Techno, half of them weren't *strangers*, they were the men and women who were under your command."

"And a full three-quarters of them hated my guts, your point?"

They had not. They had been scared and in awe of their god of war, hadn't known how to talk to a kid—a person—who would treat them with such awkward gentleness when he was trying to teach them, but who would be quick and clean and efficient on the field. They hadn't known how to handle that duality, and Phil suspects that the previous adjutants—the very people that Techno'd been burned and bitten shy by—had thus handled it poorly.

At least none of them had known about Phil's reputation. Really, he's hoping that the luck will hold here, too, and that Hypixel's admin team will remain an anomaly.

But for now all he says is, "They didn't *hate* your guts," because Techno is still bantering with him and Phil has a point to make. "You just intimidated them."

Techno snorts and shakes his head. His crown and feather glint in the sun. "Intimidated them into talkin' behind my back, more like."

"Well. You did single-handedly win them a war."

"Nah, not single-handedly," Techno says, and bumps shoulders with him. "Had you, didn't I?"

Something nameless rises in Phil's chest to hold him hostage by the lungs. "Yeah. You did." *You do*, he doesn't say, but almost does, and has to swallow down the words.

They're not bothered as they check in with the organizer and settle in. More than one person smiles at Phil in friendliness—Phil always smiles back, because dealing with bitchy antsy competitors and challengers is always a pain in the neck—and then their smiles stutter at the sight of Techno hovering over his shoulder.

To be fair, Techno does appear to be one of the tallest people here, if not *the* tallest. “I’m not even wearing heels,” Techno says when Phil notes that to him, smiling and in good humor. “Believe you me, I could be *way* taller than this.”

“Heels?” Phil shakes his head as they walk down the hallway, following their tour guide who is pretending not to listen in on their conversation. “Have you even trained in them?”

Techno blinks slowly behind his mask. His gaze slides over to the tour guide, but he looks at Phil when he answers, “I have. It’s surprisingly not that hard, y’know? Just gotta adjust for the shifted center of gravity and your reach being longer than you’re used to it being.”

Oh, this *nerd*. Phil smiles and tries to imagine a Techno who is a good three or four centimeters taller than he already is. The terrifying thing is, he *can* imagine it. “And? Did you like it?”

Techno hums in thought. “Well, the sharpened heels were always a good surprise. People never saw ‘em coming.”

Technoblade, Champion of Hypixel, kicking people off the sky maps of his preferred minigames with a sharpened boot heel that also happens to boost his height. Phil gives into the laughter, doesn’t bother muffling it because Techno always—yeah.

Techno smiles, and Phil bumps shoulders with him. “Aww, but you’d have to give up the steel-toes then, wouldn’t you?”

“You’d be surprised. There’s this great cobbler on Hypixel, remind me to introduce you to them sometime—”

“Here we are,” their guide says, breaking into the conversation with all the social grace of a ravager maneuvering a village. Phil feels no pity for him. The guy can do with a little more humbling, in his very non-biased opinion. “Your rooms for the duration of your stay with us.”

“Thank you,” Phil tells him, and smiles with all his teeth. “That’ll be all.”

The man blanches very obviously before he beats a hasty retreat. Phil can practically see the tail between the legs as he goes.

“You know,” Techno says after a long moment, “that was kinda unnecessary, Phil.”

“Techno. That was the guy who took one look at you, unarmored in deference to the current Peaceful terms of the server, and demanded that the *amateur* leave the realm at once.”

“He had a point, y’know?” Techno is already laughing about it, spreading his hands, tilting his head, inviting Phil into the joke—but he can’t.

He flutters his wings beneath the cloak, and feels the feather brush against Techno’s hair, and he has no pity left in him for anyone who so blatantly disrespects *his friend*.

“We haven’t even started the games, Phil.” Techno is confused, but he’s not telling Phil to *stop*. “C’mon, don’t make enemies this early. For me?”

For Techno? Phil sighs and folds the anger in his heart away. There will be a time and place for it. “For you,” he answers, and offers Techno a wry smile. “…sorry. I know locking horns like that bothers you.”

Techno blinks at him slowly again. Is he tired? The journey hadn’t been long, and they’d left at an actually decent hour, but maybe Techno had stayed up chatting with the admins again—or rather, the admins had kept him up chatting with them. It wouldn’t have been the first time that Phil had seen that happen whilst being a guest these last few weeks.

“It’s fine,” Techno says, and turns away to drop off his things. “It’s just. Y’know, he just works here.”

“Everyone *else* had no problem treating you with respect,” Phil snaps out without meaning to, and then catches himself. “Sorry, sorry. I’ll drop the subject. You ready for today?”

Techno takes the opportunity to redirect the conversation with both hands. Phil winces and doesn’t tuck away the pain between his ribs—he deserves that one.

“Yup.” He flicks his wrist, brings up a ghostly image of his favored sword, the one that Phil has seen cut cleanly through many an enemy on that first LARP server they’d met on. But the sword remains stubbornly transparent, and Techno dismisses it with a sigh. “So we’re gettin’ armor and weapons in the first round, huh?”

“Yeah.” Phil drops off his own things, raises his hands above his head to crack his spine. “It’s a new multi-round style—kinda like the minigames, but not quite. Not really a pure bracket-style PvP tournament, either.”

“It’s a beast all of its own.” Techno shakes his head. “Man, if this thing actually pans out—Keemstar might be onto something.”

“He hasn’t held many of these, though, has he?”

“But he’s managed to snag a lot of the big names.”

Fit. Captain Sparklez. Phil takes a moment to wonder if they’re both here yet, before he snorts to himself. Of course they would have; they’re both people who like to show up early to things, scope out the competition ahead of the game. The only question is, who had *they* come with?

Which reminds him—“Is your friend here yet? Skeppy?”

At the name, Techno lights up, visible from even behind that bone mask. “Yeah! He’s gonna be distracted by his own partner, but y’know, I think I can steal him away for a quick chat before the beginning rounds. Do you—”

Phil glides forward—one, two steps, and yeah, this server doesn’t have modified gravity, they’ll be just fine—to pull Techno into a quick one-armed hug. “Yeah, go for it. I’ve got some people of my own to find and talk to. I’ll meet back up with you when the tourney’s about to start?”

“You’ve got it.” Techno snakes out an arm to hug back—with the height difference, he easily folds Phil into his arms and Phil lets it happen, as he turns the one-armed hug into two-armed-and-fully. “See you soon.”

And then Techno’s gone, quick as a bird, a cat with mischief on the mind, and Phil watches him go with—with—

Ah, hells. He’d better actually go find Fit and Jordan and talk their ears off for a little bit. He has some thoughts to sort through.

“The Angel of Death?” he hears later, when he’s in the middle of catching up with Fit and they’re both teasing the good ol’ Captain about his fashion choices.

“Yeah?” And that’s Techno, and Phil doesn’t hesitate to turn and try and spot the guy. Fit is making questioning noises, Jordan is making understanding ones, but it doesn’t matter, Techno’s supposed to be with—

Oh. There’s someone in a red-lined hood, another with a diamond-embroidered getup that’s so vibrant Phil reckons he can spot it even in the air, and they can only be BadBoyHalo and Skeppy.

“BBH and Skeppy, huh?” Jordan is saying when Phil tunes back in. “They’re both famous in their own right—as entertainers, though, not in martial combat.”

“Are any of us really famous for combat?” Fit snorts. He’s rolling crystals between his palms again, even though they’re translucent in the way that server-level disabled objects are. “’cept for that kid that came with you, Phil.”

“You brought,” the same voice with Techno says again, “the *Angel of Death* as your partner?”

Oh.

“Hey, Phil?” That’s Jordan, leaning in and trying to catch his eye. “Hey, bud, you alright?”

Phil is too busy straining his senses to try and listen in. Somehow he has gone this entire friendship with Techno without the guy knowing his nickname, his monikers, his reputation, the things that people say about *him* when he’s not looking, and he doesn’t want it to change. He *really* doesn’t want it to change. And yet he might be unlucky enough that here—right here—

“You mean Phil?” Techno’s shoulders are shaking. He’s laughing, not maliciously, just pure humor. “Dude, it’s *Phil*, it’s fine. Keemstar even ruled it fair. On the other hand, *you’ve* been teaming every week!”

“Keemstar? *Fair*?” BadBoyHalo makes a noise like a tea kettle. “Oh gods. Skeppy, is it too late to back out now?”

“What’s the problem?” the person who can only be Skeppy asks, the guy who is one of Techno’s oldest friends. He’s got an arm around Techno’s shoulders, one of Techno’s around

his, and they're both grinning the same grin. "*I* haven't ever heard of the guy, and you know if that's true then it's fine. Chill, BBH! It'll be fine!"

"Philza Minecraft, and the Hypixel Champion who wins fights bare-handed or with flowers?" Fit laughs a little under his breath, shakes his head. "If we've got to lose to anyone here, at least it's you, Philza."

Jordan, for his part, is glancing between Phil and Techno. His eyes aren't glowing, but he's flicking his fingers like he wants to weave some greater magic. His tone is studiously neutral when he says, "He calls you 'Phil,' huh."

Fit stops laughing. He turns his head, slowly and deliberately. It's still not as terrifying as Phil's seen Techno's to be, which is really saying something.

"Where did you meet this guy again?" Fit asks, and fuck, Phil's got to nip this in the bud before they can get ahead of themselves.

"On a server where they all demonized and vilified him for being good at what he does, so I swear to all the stars, Fit, if you try to give him any trouble—"

"Whoa, whoa." Fit raises both his hands. The surrendering gesture is undermined by the fact that he's still got end crystals tucked between his fingers, but when Phil gives them a pointed glance he winces and dismisses them readily enough. "I'm not trying to threaten him or anything, Philza. I've heard of Technoblade's rumors, too."

"I haven't," Jordan says, but his eyes are far away now. No doubt consulting his realm's gods and goddesses for any information they might have. "But if you claim him as a friend, Phil—then I'm sure he's a good guy."

Phil thinks about the way Techno gently corrects aspiring warriors in their drills, the genuine way he jokes around with the Hypixel admins, the determination as he throws himself into everything he does, the dedication to shouldering the hopes of those who believe in him until he's risking—until he's courting, inevitably—deification.

Players aren't meant to shift into other existences. It's painful, and harsh, and terrifying in turns. Phil wouldn't wish it on anyone.

"The best," he tells two of the people who have known *him* longer than most. He hopes—he wishes, he pleads with the universe—that someday, Techno will get to that point.

It's fascinating. Phil loves chatting with people, getting to know them, exchanging information, swapping tips—but he can't do it for long. Arguably he's hung around for Technoblade for too long—throughout the war, the peace negotiations, then Hypixel and the citadel and the birthday party—but there is something about him, about their interactions, that makes Phil—

Happy.

“You just clicked,” Jordan—the good Captain Sparklez of Mianite—says, and there are undertone vibrations to his voice. His eyes are closed, but they’re still lit and glowing beneath his eyelids. “You became friends.”

“Yes.”

Fit’s shaking his head, chagrinned, but Sparklez offers Phil a smile and that’s all the encouragement he needs.

“Then I wish you luck.” Sparklez opens his eyes. They’re tinted towards amethyst again. “Now go and get your σύναστρο.”

Techno grunts when Phil slides back up to him, quiet, foreboding. More than one person skirts around him.

Phil watches where Skeppy and BadBoyHalo have chattered off to, bright and airy and extroverted. “Managed to catch up?”

Techno shrugs. He’s frowning, just a little; with the bone mask on his face he becomes even harder to read. But he’s not as frustrated as Phil had seen him during that time with the unreliable scouts, nor the faction lord asking for impossible miracles. There’s that, at least.

Before he can prod further into the issue the event organizer calls them to order. And then that’s that—they’re thrown into the first round.

“A battle royale.” Techno shakes his head, shifts on his feet, drops his crossed arms to let them hang loose at his sides. He offers Phil a grin, one that Phil returns without thinking about it. “We’re gonna have to go straight for the loot boxes, Phil. Can’t let any of ‘em get better gear than us.”

Phil reaches out and finds only empty air. It’s so very odd to be without his Benihime, but those are the server rules. “How did I even let you talk me into this?”

And then Techno’s laughing, and the horn is blowing, and they’re all sprinting off their starting pads into the forest or through the oddly shaped map in search of treasure.

Phil finds their first loot chest; he tosses gear to Techno even as he swipes the stone axe for himself. “Need any help?”

“Nah, it’s all good.” Techno’s as quick and as efficient with the straps as he always is, settling it over his signature red cloak without hesitation. How he’s going to manage a helmet and the crown, Phil doesn’t quite know, but he’s looking forward to seeing it. “Toss me the sword?”

Phil tosses him the sword. Techno catches it without looking, handles it as neatly as you please. The stone catches the noonday sun and shines like iron as he swings it to test its weight.

After a moment, Techno nods. Phil tightens the last straps on his own gold chestpiece, and they move on.

It’s not long before Techno’s doing a quick hopping movement over a brown log—no, another loot chest. Phil keeps an eye out for them both as Techno digs through it.

He’s not expecting the chuckle. “Hey, Phil, look what I got.”

Phil turns around—and then he startles, wings going wide, head rearing back. He’s not too proud to admit it. Techno is, after all, holding a diamond sword.

A diamond sword, in a tournament whose rules had warned them that the loot chest would be randomized with rarity-based weights. There’s only two diamond swords throughout the map, and here Techno is with one of them.

“*How*?”

Techno doesn’t reply, just offers him a grin and the stone sword tossed back Phil’s way. “Ready to go kill some people?”

And here’s the thing—Technoblade isn’t usually bloodthirsty. All his plans during the war had been neat, clean, precise things; they had been planned down to the second and third eventualities with backup plans for each. He had been renowned in the sparring ring for the way he’d made his takedowns look quick and easy, armed or unarmed. He had been unstoppable on the battlefield, a scythe cutting through a field of wheat.

But never had he sounded as joyful as he does now, hunting down fellow competitors. It just so happens that Jordan and some other guy named Connor are the first people that they run across, and Connor balks at the sight of the diamond sword in Techno’s hand.

Jordan just sends Phil a long-suffering look across the field, before he snags his partner by the elbow and turns them around to book it.

Or tries to, at least. Techno’s faster. He’s struck-and-twisted, as quick as you please, and in the next moment he pulls his sword out of Connor. The poor guy is already disappearing into light, the respawn magic whisking him away. “C’mon, Phil,” Techno says, flicking glittering blood off his sword. “Let’s go chase down the good Captain. We need those points.”

They mow through the terrain to get to Jordan. Phil gets in the final hit as Techno flanks around and cuts off the avenues of escape, and Jordan rolls his eyes at him when Phil sinks his stone sword through his shoulder.

“At least it’s you,” he says, cheeky to the end, before he dissolves into light.

Phil flicks his wrist to clean the blood off his blade before he sheathes it. Jordan’d had an iron sword, and he swaps them out. The balance is off—it’s a cheap blade, forged by an apprentice blacksmith who’s had maybe a year, two at the most, of experience—but it’s sturdy enough.

When he looks up, Techno is staring at him. “What?” Phil asks, wondering if he’s got blood on his face.

Techno snorts a little, shakes his head, looks away—no, to the horizon, to the little wooded area that the rest of the competitors had disappeared into. “Always knew you had it in you,” he says, and then starts walking.

A little confused, a lot bemused, Phil follows in his trail.

However it works, Techno’s luck strikes again—they find loot chests full of ender pearls, packaged stew, even the odd piece of armor. Phil throws bottles at Techno and watches as the magic splashes and sinks through him. He has his wings, he doesn’t need enchantments on his armor or gear, but Techno favors them and he’ll need the surplus magic to do it quickly.

“Who’s closest?”

Techno squints at the compass, bumps elbows with Phil in thanks for the bottles. “It’s Skeppy.”

“Your friend?” Phil has experience in sparring with Jordan and Fit, both on and off worlds that have respawn magic. He’s long used to doing whatever it takes to be the last man standing. But Techno, who is gentle? Techno, who treats his friends and family with his heart on his sleeve for anyone who knows how to see?

Techno, who is bloody and bloodthirsty, looking up to grin at Phil with all his teeth. “Well, yeah, but he knew that I was signing up for this event, too.”

“Oh hey there Skeppy!”

“I—fuckin’—*Technoblade would you chill for once*—”

“*Oh hey there Skeppy!*”

Phil just about loses his shit laughing. Techno’s bright and glimmering in the sun, crown and cloak and enchanted diamond sword lending him a sharp edge that turns the predatory air Phil sees into something heavy, tangible, *real*.

Hell, if he weren’t teamed with him, Phil might flee from Techno too. As it is, Skeppy tries. BadBoyHalo tries.

Techno cuts down his diamond-adorned friend with a clean stroke of the blade, with a laugh, without another word, and turns to the guy’s partner.

BadBoyHalo doesn’t hesitate. As soon as Skeppy is light fragments he’s in the wind, trying to buy himself time, better ground, better footing, something and anything he can get his metaphorical hands on in this two-versus-one.

“Get back here!” Techno laughs again and starts giving chase, long legs eating up ground like it’s nothing. “It’s over, BadBoyHalo! It’s over! No advancement for you!”

Phil follows in his wake, bemused. This is worse than when they'd been on the field, back in the war, where respawn magic takes effort and there are people fighting for something. These people? They're fighting for sport. There's blood and joy in those people who've been doing this for years.

Blood for the blood god!

He stops in his tracks. He cranes his neck, looks for the magical eyes and invisible drones that are broadcasting this tournament to the rest of the universe, but he can't see any of them. Of course he can't; their very presence would give away players and their locations. And it's not an audience member, anyway. That had been—

Blood for the blood god, hums the universe, and Phil bites down on the inside of his cheek.

Techno is far ahead now, having stabbed BadBoyHalo in the waters of the river. He flicks his cloak as he returns to where Phil's frozen, diamond sword clean again and held loose by his side. "Hey, Phil?"

Phil hears him as though he's far away, too busy straining his ears to try and hear—

Death death blood destruction blood for the blood god Technoblade never dies!

"Phil," Techno says, gently this time, and Phil shakes himself out of it.

They might have less time than he'd thought. But Techno right here, right now, is gleeful and having fun and enjoying the thrum of the fight, and Phil can't bring himself to interrupt it.

Maybe it makes him selfish. Maybe it makes him a bad friend. He bites on the inside of his cheek until it bleeds, then swallows. Says, "Sorry, mate. Think I spaced out for a minute there. You ready?"

Techno blinks at him from behind the mask, white pupils on black sclera that makes it look like he's got stars for eyes. He nods and accepts Phil's words at face value. "I'm ready. C'mon, I think there's some people at middle."

They do find people at middle. Techno distracts them by calling out taunts while Phil swims up the center column of water, a stack of icy snowballs and his own iron sword in hand.

They end the elimination round as neatly as you please. After, Phil isn't even breathing hard. He wipes the edge of his blade—doesn't need to, really, the blood is already dissipating into magic and light, but it's habit and it's a moment of silence when he needs it.

Techno is waiting below when Phil is done and looks. He's got his hands on his hips, a satisfied smile on his face that's visible even from this height.

"That's the elimination round done," he shouts up at Phil, and grins. "Now you gonna get down here, or what?"

Phil tilts his head, but yeah, there's the message and the ringing of the gong. Round's over. Now they can't yell at him if he decides to bend the rules a little.

He spreads his wings, flicks away the water, sighs as he enjoys the stretch from where they'd been tightly folded against his back. It's a little bit of an awkward drop, there's not much space to glide down, but—yeah.

Techno's already placed some water for him, deep enough for a splashdown, and Phil steps off the platform and into a dive.

"He's just some big shot from a tournament-hub," someone is hissing. "Philza was supposed to be the difficult one!"

"You didn't hear the rest of the rumors, did you?" The other voice is pitying. "Did you hear who else he's friends with?"

"What? No. Don't tell me—"

"TapL, Calvin, Fruitberries." A sharp inhale. "Even the famous guy, Skeppy—did you *see* them interacting before the tourney started?"

Silence. Then: "Well, *fuck*."

"Yeah."

"Stars, who the hell is this Technoblade guy? He's got both skills *and* connections?" But that, there, is envy, specifically about so-called '*connections*.'

Phil stifles the urge to stalk over there and talk some sense into them. Techno isn't friends with them because he wants something out of the relationship. After just a single night of watching him spend time with TapL and Calvin, Phil knows it's the furthest thing from that. There is too much genuine affection and camaraderie there, too much legitimate fondness.

But Techno is here, and they've still got the rest of the tournament to go. It's a bracket-style instead of a battle royale of teams who live the longest, and Techno grins at him even as he tosses a sword from hand to hand.

"You ready?" he asks. He's back to being deadpan again but Phil knows how to read him now. He's excited, craving a good duel, the lilting dance of the fight.

Skeppy and BadBoyHalo are waving at them from the stands above. Phil glances up, arm raised and waving back, then looks back to Techno. "I'm ready."

They sweep the competition. At least there's that; Jordan would never have let Phil live it down if they'd taken out his team with extreme prejudice and then been eliminated themselves afterwards.

Fit, though—he's wily, grown up on 2b2t, has previously shown Phil the ropes of living in anarchy servers like it. He's not afraid to fight dirty, and he knows that to Phil, Techno is—

Is—

Fit lunges forward with a sword in his hand and his trajectory aimed squarely at Techno's back, and Phil brings up his own blade to meet him.

"You got it?" Techno asks, and he's breathless and joyful and he's pressing his back to Phil's. He's solid and warm, steady and grounded, all heady trust that lights a fire beneath Phil's ribs.

"Yeah," he answers, and smiles in the face of Fit's surprise. "C'mon, let's not dally. We don't have all day."

"Banter in the middle of a fight?" Fit huffs a laugh and pushes him back. Phil braces himself, unwilling to knock into Techno or unbalance his partner. "That's quite unlike you, Philza Minecraft."

"What can I say." Phil feels like he's in the middle of a flight on his hardcore world's thermal beauties—high, free, joyous. He steps forward, Techno steps back, and they rotate in sync to the beat of the fight. "My partner's just that good."

They win the tourney. Of course they do. Techno is Technoblade, Hypixel's long-reigning Champion, and even though only half the participants recognize him Phil is Philza, the so-called angel of death, famous in survivalist's circles.

Most days, he abhors his title. Today, when it and his skills in keeping himself alive means that he gets to stand by Techno's side, the cheer and thrill of a victory in the air, as Keemstar shakily crowns them the tournament winners after an afternoon in which they'd plowed through the competition—he's glad of it.

After, Techno is balancing two crowns on his head, laughing. Skeppy and BadBoyHalo have already swung by, and now the crowd wants to bow, simper, scrape and earn their goodwill—but Phil's done this song and dance with Techno before, and he gets them out without too much trouble.

"Well?" he asks afterwards. Techno hums and tilts his head at him. Phil elaborates: "Where do you want to go next?"

Techno makes a scoffing sound, light and dismissive in the back of his throat. "Don't ask me questions like that, man, you think I know what I'm doing?"

But it's teasing, it's a joke, and Techno bumps elbows with Phil again. Phil remembers what he'd promised Plancke, and through them what he'd promised Hypixel: that he won't let Techno journey alone.

And even though he's quickly approaching a new record for the longest amount of time spent with another person—even though he hasn't done this in literal years—here in the presence of a friend that even the good Captain teases him about, Phil thinks about home.

There's the End realm, back home, and he wonders if Techno's seen the void before. The unrelenting dark, a night so deep that it fools the brain into imagining depth, the hidden crevices of the ocean and the wonders of the sky ranges. He thinks about the castle and the nethervoid and the old statues of He and She.

He remembers, too, old books that Techno had tucked away in his Hypixel citadel room with careful hands, old texts transliterated and engraved into data crystals for him to carry. If there is anyone who will love the hidden histories as Phil loves them, it would be Techno.

"Where're you going?" Techno asks, like a release from a promise, an understanding. He pushes up the crown—the crowns—so that he can see, keeps carefully away from the feather braided into his hair, looks to Phil with deep eyes that are like the stars: coolly understanding.

If Phil chooses to part ways here, even after what he'd told Plancke, Techno wouldn't take it badly. But—

Phil smiles a little, laughs under his breath. Says, a lot daring and a little affectionately, obviously fond, "You can always come by my place."

He's ready for Techno to not notice it. He's even ready for confusion, or uncertainty, or distaste. But the silence breaks and Techno smiles back, reaching up to stroke a finger on the vanes of the feather in his hair, and Phil shivers as his wings flutter in response.

"If you wanna go, then I'd love to go."

Fit and Jordan will probably want to talk with him again. But Techno is here and solid and whole. He hasn't died or gotten injured. He hasn't left.

"Then let's *go*," Phil says, overcome with a sudden urgency, and he grabs Techno's hand and pulls them both to the server portal before they can get sucked into anything boring like a post-competition reception.

Chapter End Notes

[comes in late with boba tea] so, did you guys want Plot? :D

Techno terrorized Skywars sometimes by punching them with his bare fists or, on one notable occasion, a flower.

He also actually does find a diamond sword 15 minutes and 35 seconds into MCM 10 (the one where he teamed with Phil). I'm telling you, sometimes this stuff writes itself :>

I almost definitely botched the Greek conjugation; sorry about that. But συναστρέω, pronounced synastréō, is *to be born under the same star*. To my understanding it can be both platonic and romantic, but here in the good universe of our fic, Captain Sparklez means it to be fully platonic. A kind of soul mate, same-heart, if you will.

quiet birds in circled flight

Chapter Summary

Phil is rustier at playing host than he remembers, or realizes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Techno is a fantastic guest; he's just as mindful as when he'd been the host. He asks Phil before he touches things, wanders after him and asks questions when Phil rambles on about one project or another, makes the appropriate noises of appreciation when Phil shows him his finished works.

And when he asks his questions, there's a brightness to Techno's eye that squeezes something between Phil's ribs, makes him go breathless. There is wonder there, and awe and admiration, yes, but there's also—youth.

"How long did it take you to build this?" Techno asks, voice hushed.

Phil glances up from his enchantment table, tries to really imagine seeing this place for the first time. It's just his main base; nothing special. There's a bed and a kitchen and redstone mechanics in the back to fill up the metal tub for when he wants something warmer than a dip in the ocean to clean up. But the base is right out on the water on a floating man-made island, and just below is the underwater storage room he'd shown Techno.

"Not too long," he says, and rubs the back of his neck for lack of anything better to do with his hands.

"Not too *long*?" Techno turns on his heel again, gaze up, eyes wide behind the mask, clearly soaking everything in. "Phil, this looks like it's been here for years!"

Technically it has, but compared to the last world he'd loved and lost, the things here had only taken the blink of an eye.

"I've made things that take longer before," Phil answers, before he loses his nerve. It's still so very odd showing somebody around in a place he's been by himself for years, but it's Techno. Phil had shown even Fit and ol' Sparklez this.

"You've already shown me everything around here," Techno huffs. He turns back to Phil again. The elytra flutter on his back, and they're—moving? He's a lot more expressive with them than Phil had expected him to be this early. "You're sayin' you've got more scattered throughout the world?"

And, well. It's been a while since Phil's toured his own world. He smirks and shakes out his wings. "You wanna go and see them?"

It hits Phil in the middle of the tour, somewhere between the sky islands and the ocean monument: he'd asked if someone had wanted to visit his Hardcore world, and they'd *accepted*.

He's invited people before, sure, but most turn down the invitation. It's a lot, adjusting from the sometimes-Creative and always-infinite opportunities that is in multiplayer worlds, to a world that is inherently dangerous and restrictive. Most people don't want to risk death, even if it's not their world and thus the death will be temporary for them at best.

But Techno had accepted, and now he's here, seeing things that only Phil has ever seen and touching walls that only Phil has ever carved, and he's smiling and laughing and crouching to offer his hand to Pog and Champ for sniffs, the two cats that roam around here because Phil had made the horrible mistake of feeding them once—

So. Yeah. Ocean monument, shiny distraction, his own excuses made to go check on a project-or-another while Techno rests his feet and watches the clear blue sky.

It means that Phil's free to fly and get some space, air, distance, something even he doesn't know what he's looking for.

He goes until he passes over the mountains, and then goes even further than that, to the far oceans. The universe is easier to hear out here, by just a little. The End is here, and that's as close to the heart of it that any of them are ever going to get, without venturing out into the well where the fabric pulls in like a particularly stubborn hole in the fabric of creation.

But when Phil arrows towards the horizon, heading west and chasing midnight, the stars are closer than they've ever been.

They're usually scattered in a very particular streak across the sky, all blues and purples and greens that look more like gemstones than fire. Right now, when Phil flips himself over and skims his wings in the ocean spray to look up, they're more yellow than green, more green than blue, more blue than purple. There's something happening with his world—

And then the air hums and shivers, and the water beneath him chimes with the song of the sea, and the End yawns wide at that line where the sea meets the sky, and that unnameable voice says: That took you long enough.

He beats his wings once—twice—feels the pressure and the shape of the wind beneath those outstretched feathers. It reminds him of where he is and what he's doing.

The voice says nothing more, but it does not need to. Phil remembers. He flips back right-side-up, feels gravity tug at his heart, and wonders how much longer he's got left before he inevitably screws things up.

Techno is a contradiction. He kills his friends as easily as he offers them a hand up; he is gentle with the people who need it; he debates complicated morality and philosophy with sophistication. He could be anywhere from fourteen to eighteen to twenty-two to older, and that's not even counting the oddity that is Player aging.

And here he is, sitting around the hearth with Phil, being delighted at something as simple as roasting marshmallows.

"You've seriously never done this before?" Phil asks, for what must be the fifth time.

And for the fifth time, Techno replies, "Nope." He says it nonchalantly too, though there's still the faint smile on his face that means he isn't offended at Phil's repeated questions. "I've told you before, Phil, we just didn' have time for things like this."

Phil can imagine it. Hypixel and their Citadel are grandiose, but the admins are busy and Techno would have thrown himself into fighting and training and fighting again with the same single-mindedness he'd shown in the competition. Stars, the same single-mindedness he'd shown on that first server they'd met, in the middle of the war.

He puts a marshmallow on the fire and turns it over. Techno's watching the browning process with a critical eye and his full attention, as though this is a potion that needs to be watched while brewing. Phil watches him, while he's distracted.

His crown is still shimmering—has never stopped, really—but Phil's gotten used to the humming of it over time. Or he had been, anyway. Right here, right now, sitting on the rugs in Phil's sky island base, it sounds like that singing is closer.

Maybe it's the fact that they're higher in the air, closer to those stars. Maybe it's the fact that the End is only a portal away. Or maybe it's because Techno's still got the elytra on, and he's working it like someone would wings, all unconscious fluttering and careful movements around the doorways.

Phil's thinking about wings and that conversation on the ramparts a month ago—gods, had it only been a month? A month and a half?—when Techno says, "So this isn't your first world."

He isn't too proud to admit it; he startles. Techno snort-laughs, amused and joyful, before he manages to stifle it.

"How do you know that?" Phil asks when he's gotten his dignity back. He hadn't mentioned his previous worlds to Techno today, and Techno hadn't known who Philza Minecraft was, nor the moniker the Angel of Death. Unless he's been faking that ignorance, but why would he do that?

"I can just tell," Techno says, and turns over his marshmallow. He looks up to give Phil a thoughtful look. But the corners of his mouth are twitching up again, and his eyes are glittering like Polaris, and his mask is off and set aside, his crown and cloak with it, and—

"Leave me some of my mystique," Phil manages to wheeze out, just so that the silence doesn't get too awkward, and he's vindicated when Techno breaks the unimpressed character

to laugh under his breath.

“Sure,” Techno says after, tired and content. Phil takes a moment to just—watch him, because he’s happy, he’s soft, he looks at peace—and Phil can’t break that.

This is his problem to solve, his burden to bear. Whatever is going on, he promises himself, he’ll fix it before Techno even gets the chance to notice that something is wrong.

Techno absolutely *loves* the End.

Phil hadn’t been expecting it. The realm is a terror, where one wrong move spells death for the unwary or the complacent, and the air is filled with ozone and static. He always feels closer to the heart of the world here than anywhere else, and it’s not exactly a feeling for the faint of heart.

But Techno tilts his head back to stare at the starry void, and breathes in deeply, and like this—backlit against the beaconlight coming from Endlantis—he looks like he could belong here.

And that—more than anything else—is what drives him over the edge, just a little.

He ditches Techno again. He doesn’t *mean* to do it, just like he hadn’t meant to leave Techno behind staring at the ocean monument and dipping his bare feet into the sea, his shoes beside him, but he does. What does that say about him? Techno had opened up his hearth and home to Phil, had introduced his family to his new friend, had put him up and shown him around the place where he’d grown up and—

Hadn’t kicked him out.

And here Phil is, running away from the first person to see this side of him. His world is a reflection of who he is, as it is for any Hardcore Player. The sky islands are because he’d wanted a place to rest midflight, and then he’d made it pretty. The ocean monument is a dedication to a long-dead life and the memories he’d made there. The monstrosity in the End is a project that no one sane would ever have attempted; takes too long, requires too many resources, and for what?

Just something shiny to look at.

Phil braces his elbows on his knees and hides his face in his hands. Here, on the rooftop perch, is the privacy from his—guest—friend—σύναστρο—

Privacy, period, to have a small breakdown.

He breathes in. Holds it in his lungs. Feels the dead air between the feathers of his wings. Lets it out. Rinse, repeat.

The thing is, Techno isn’t a loud person. He makes small noises as anyone does, those quiet unconscious things, whether that’s breathing or shuffling on his feet or tilting his head, his clothes rustling as he shifts.

But Phil is used to being the only Player on his world, used to tuning his ear to the music of the land, the running water and quiet hiss of pistons and subtle unfurling of leaves and plants.

He can hear Techno *breathing* from here, and he's half of Endlantis away, sitting in a boat, quietly steering it with an oar. Phil pinpoints him without thinking about it.

And Phil's been around the block long enough to know why he's doing this. It's information overload, or friendship overload, or whatever it is that had made Fit sigh and Jordan laugh, all those years ago, before they'd also left. He's an introvert and he values his time alone and this has been a good journey, a fun one, with Technoblade—but this will come to an end, too.

Everyone leaves, eventually. And it won't even be Techno's fault when that happens. It'll be Phil's, because he is a mess that can't handle prolonged interaction, and that's not even saying anything about the *rest* of this thrice-damned disaster, and even though there is a pain in his chest and his heart rising in his throat as he tries to push through it—it won't be enough.

It's never enough.

Loved and lost, Phil reminds himself, and digs the heels of his palms into his eyes until he sees stars. And then he breathes, and rolls up to his feet, and goes to face the music.

The music is surprisingly quiet.

Techno welcomes him back while paying only half-attention to Phil, and that honestly helps more than anything else that he could have done. If he notices that Phil is quieter, less likely to start the chatter about his builds and what he's doing and why he's doing it, he doesn't bring attention to it.

Phil loves him for that, more than he'd thought he would.

They spend the rest of the day in that peaceful lull. It reminds Phil of being out in the boat and adrift in the ocean off his main base: calm waters, beautiful skies. The star-studded darkness above his head at night, wheeling slowly by. The absolute serenity and the knowledge that if he folds his wings and goes overboard, the water will hold him, in a way that even the thermals above sometimes fail to do.

No one has ever felt like this before. Even Fit and the good Captain had demanded more things of him after a while, because that's what people do when they are friends: they spend time and hang out and go on adventures together. And that's good and all, and Phil knows and appreciates the value of it in his own life, but all those things from him require—moderation.

But Techno—he stays quiet. He nudges Phil's foot where they sit together around the fire, roasting marshmallows. He is quiet and doesn't make eye contact and says nothing when Phil sprawls, wings haphazardly spread in the sun, and doesn't offer to preen unless Phil mentions it first.

His fingers are gentle when they straighten vanes, flicking away stardust as he cleans, and he keeps the feather in his hair with no word about when it's going to be removed. He hums a little as he works, and it's a nice song, lovely, simple but with enough interesting melodic developments that Phil doesn't mind listening to it.

He almost falls asleep to it, soothed into it, and on that border between waking and dreaming he realizes: Techno's singing the same song as the crown on his head.

The hallowed humming rises and dips like waves on the shore, first and second harmonics in octaves that would hurt a human's throat to sing. Phil eyes it uncertainly when Techno isn't looking.

"What's up?" Techno asks from behind him. He's going from the top of the wing and making his way downwards, and it feels so good that Phil can't help it—he melts into the floor a little more. Techno moves his arms to make room until Phil's comfortably half-sprawled on him, feathers and all.

There is no Plancke or Robity or some other Hypixel admin who would jealously guard their secrets. If he wants to ask, he can.

"Just wondering," Phil says, and is surprised when it comes out drowsy. Techno doesn't say a word about it, though, just continues to hum and preen his wings.

And it feels so *good*, but Phil also has a question. He manages to scrape himself together enough to ask it: "Where's the crown from?"

Techno's fingers still in his wings. They don't tense or curl in like any other person would have, but Phil tenses anyway, out of instinct and that primal gut-deep fear.

Slowly, Techno asks, "Pardon?"

The crown continues singing. It's nothing like the sea or the sky or the End, all natural things that make sense. It's magic that runs straight through the veins of the universe, Phil remembers, and stares up into the big blue sky.

"You don't have to answer," he says. "I'm just curious, is all. You're singing the same thing it is, or it's harmonizing with you—not quite sure which is which, actually—"

"Wait, hold on," Techno interrupts, and removes his hands from Phil's wings. Phil almost follows after them before he wrenches his own wings back, chagrinned, embarrassed, mortified.

Techno doesn't seem to notice. He's not moving away but he's not moving closer, either, hands tucked away and buried in his cloak where it's spread over his lap.

"You can *hear* it?"

Phil blinks, confused. Oh, what he wouldn't give to turn around right now and see Techno's expression—but the air is still buzzing with latent energy, and the sun is warm, and he'd

broken this serenity with his own two hands. Phil stays turned around, back to Techno. "Yeah, I can. What song is it?"

That's a less innocuous question than *Where is it from*, but Techno still answers it slowly: "I dunno."

Well. That's—not concerning, not if it's an artifact since the details tend to be fuzzy on those no matter what they are, but that's still—interesting.

The humming rises, and rises, and rises, until it lingers on a high note.

"Sometimes," Techno says dryly, and Phil can imagine the funny little expression on his face when he's trying not to laugh, "it doesn't even sing. It just—is an annoyin' little thing."

Then why do you keep it around? Phil doesn't ask, but Techno must hear it anyway—on the wind, in his posture, unsaid but the logical question—because he adds, "Simon said it was a gift to me. Showed up maybe a year and some ago. Never told me from who, though."

The high note plummets until it's chiming lowly, sporadic bell-like tones that go back and forth, back and forth. The peculiar static-filled notes that the End prefers harmonizes with them.

A mysterious origin of an artifact full of power, Phil thinks to himself, and carefully doesn't wonder just who it could be from.

They're roasting marshmallows again, when something—buzzes—screeches in his ears—his very being *scraping* against something harsh and leaving him raw—

Phil clasps both hands over his ears, curls up, pulls his wings around himself even though that doesn't help. Distantly there's the clatter of metal and a screeching of wood on stone and then arms—hands—fingers on his feathers, stroking, someone—

"Phil," someone is saying, and then angrily, above his head and to the side, "oh, shush *you*, we like Phil remember? Now stop it—"

No.

"Phil—"

Get *out*.

"Phil?"

"*Get out*," he roars, throws-himself-away-rolls-braces-springs-up, wings spread. He reaches out and Benihime drops into his hand, but its whispering is only barely audible over the rest of the cacophony.

He mantles his wings, raises them, fills the room with them, but still the singing doesn't stop. It rings in his ears and reaches inside his skull and thumbs through the words in his brain with

a briskness that *hurts*, and he just—

He just wants it to stop.

Murmurs. Quiet words beneath the noise. And then someone is yelling, “Call me later Phil, alright?” and there’s a flutter of—feathers—but he’s the only one here—no one else lives in this Hardcore world, it is just *him*—

A feather moves away. What? They’re not supposed to be detached, that’s his, a part of Phil, it can’t—

He tries to tug it back, and it snags on something. Thin and tangled, finer than even sheep’s wool.

“Oh,” someone is saying, and then “Right,” and there are fingers on the quill and a low voice murmuring “Didn’t mean to—sorry,” and then the feather is flying back to Phil, back home, universe balanced, all things restored.

And then he realizes: no.

Wait.

That had been—

His world whispers to him, but Phil doesn’t hear it, standing in shock, stance half-predatory and half-standing, feather in hand, heart in his throat and quickly sinking in his chest.

He doesn’t know how long he stands there. The world doesn’t feel like it quite—fits, as though his edges overlap with something else, or the center of gravity is slightly off.

A chime snaps him out of it. When it filters through the fog to him, when he recognizes it, he practically dives for his communicator, and his own feather is crumpling in his grip but there’s nothing to be done for it when there are more important things to be seeing—

It’s from Techno. Of course it is. He’s gentle with his friends and thoughtful in his actions, and even after Phil had practically *thrown him out* he’s sent a message: *Call me later when you’re feeling better, alright?*

No judgement. No awkward silences. Just Techno, and he is so *good*, even though he doesn’t know the full story, and Phil—

He overflows with it: his guilt, his grief.

He is so miserable, he puts himself in bed—doesn’t even turn down the covers, just sprawls on top, uncaring of where he lands, on shoulder or arm or wing—and wills himself asleep.

Thank you for bringing him here, the End says, and Phil falls out of bed into a feathery puddle on the floor.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

And Techno is so understanding, so nonchalant about it, that it cuts deep into Phil’s heart. He hadn’t thought he could feel even guiltier, even worse, than he already had—but apparently he can. The very air is heavy and no matter how deep he breathes, all he tastes is salt.

Techno’s wearing the mask again. He doesn’t say anything about the feather. And Phil cannot leave it here—he can, technically, let it go unsaid and they’ll part as friends because Techno is pragmatic and he understands and he knows, he knows, but—

He deserves better.

“I didn’t mean to take it back,” Phil says, and when Techno stills—dangerously, predatorily, uncertainly—he adds, “The feather, I mean.”

Techno—if he blinks behind the mask, Phil can’t see it. The communicator hologram doesn’t include that much detail.

“I’m not judgin’ you,” Techno tells him, after a long moment where Phil wonders if he’s put his foot in it. He tilts his head and looks away, and that’s visible on the holo at least, even if his hands—fidgeting, Phil doesn’t doubt, with his sword or quill or whatever is close at hand—aren’t.

It feels like a loss, that Phil can’t see him, can only drink in the sight of him from the shoulders-up, his face concealed, everything that makes him *Techno* now tucked neatly away.

He refocuses when Techno snorts. “Farthest thing I’m doin’ right now is judging you, man. It’s your world, and if livin’ with Simon and the others have taught me anything, it’s that you’re sensitive to who and what comes through your world. I don’t begrudge you needin’ some time to yourself.”

And that’s—a way to put it, but it’s not the whole story, only the least shameful parts of this entire affair put neatly into words and in Techno’s understanding tone, and Phil—

No maybes about it; this does make him a bad friend, but Phil lets Techno continue to believe that his need to take a break from people is the only thing that’s wrong.

They chat for the next few months on communicator only.

It’s not that Phil doesn’t *want* to give the feather back. It’s his, maybe, but it had only started as his and now it’s Techno’s, and anyway he’d given it to the guy for his birthday for a reason. It hums in his hand and the spot where it’d belong on his wings is still sore, but that doesn’t matter when there’s someone to be giving it back to.

But whenever he opens up his contacts list to invite Techno to his world again he hesitates, and whenever he stands in front of his own server portal with his bags all ready to leave he backs off at the last minute, and whenever he screams his frustrations to the sky—

The sky roars back.

Half of it is him and half of it is not, but all of it is asking *You really thought you could keep a friend?*

He is a man known as the Angel of Death. He is not destined to have anything come so easily.

And his world is here, anyway. This is the place he's spent long days planning and sketching, long weeks building. That's not even counting the number of hours he's stared at his walls from the sky, tweaking the exact shape or the exact material or the exact *something* until it had felt—right.

So Techno goes off to his next adventures, and Phil stays home, and resolutely reads messages from only one person. The rest, he ignores.

He finds the data crystals later. They're the ones from Hypixel, that Plancke and Bembo have packaged up for him. He spins one between his fingers, slots another into his communicator, and has to pause for a minute.

He'd thought they'd just given him the bare bones of their blueprints. Builders are notoriously close-lipped about their projects and the finer details; their reputation hinges on how well they design and build. They all have their industry secrets, their specialties.

But Hypixel—the admin team, the community—has been generous. Phil flicks his way through an exact tutorial on how to build a hot air balloon. They've included the exact runes and the ratio of lapis lazuli to redstone he needs.

That's not all. There are recipes snuck into the folder for the high citadel arches Phil had fallen in love with, and a guide on how to waterproof jungle wood for their Skyblock maps in the middle of an essay about glassblowing.

They've been more than generous. Phil, if he were so inclined, could make a fortune on selling these secrets to the highest bidder. It's a measure of trust and a declaration of—something, Phil doesn't even know. Favor? Allyship?

Whatever it is, it makes bile rise up in the back of his throat. Here they are, giving a practical stranger they'd known for all of two weeks such valuables. There's no doubt that they still have their own tricks up their sleeves—Plancke is a classic ascended admin, wily and subvertive, and Phil doesn't doubt that the rest have similarly covered their bases—but still.

Everyone that Techno's surrounded with, friends and family alike, are so—irrevocably, undeniably good, down to their cores. Phil's in awe of it. It's like coming in from the cold and sitting down by the fire: he wants to come closer, even as it hurts to do.

He'll have to find a time to apologize to Techno, even if the guy doesn't want to hear it. It's the literal least that Phil can do.

He gets his opportunity sooner rather than later.

“They’re making a new *planet*,” Techno says, and his excitement is so readily apparent in his bright eyes. He’s playing with a pen again, spinning it around and around in thought; no doubt he’s got a notebook close at hand. “A planet, Phil! And guess what the entire purpose of the server is?”

Phil hasn’t heard of this before Techno had mentioned it; he actually doesn’t know. “What is it?”

“To conquer.” And there’s the smile, small but sharp, a bared knife. “They’ve sent out invitations. I’ve got one, and one for you, too, if you want it.”

Techno says it gently, but normally—doesn’t draw attention to it, doesn’t try to hide it. It’s Phil’s choice if he goes, the same as it has always been. Space and time, but loved and lost, and Phil’s done hiding.

He’d messed up, but here Techno is again, and maybe there’s something to be said for Jordan’s description of a σύναστρο.

“Of course,” Phil says, and swallows down the guilt when Techno’s expression lights up like he’d promised him the world. “When are you going? We can join it together.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to the commenter TheFoodIsPoisoned who informed me that the noun/adjective for the Ancient Greek bit is σύναστρο! <3

to break your teeth on love

Chapter Summary

Phil is a coward, but at least he's a coward with a workable plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been hard to see over the communicator, and that is Phil's only reason—his only excuse—but the first time he sees Techno again in the void between one server and the next, he has to bite down the words: *You look different*.

The worst part is, Techno does. He still has the crown and cloak, of course, and Phil knows better than most why he keeps those close to him; but there is more height to the frame and a sheen to his mask and a hum when he speaks that hadn't been there before.

It's low in Phil's ears, and Techno's voice is already low in the baritones; it's probably easy, Phil thinks with some hysteria, that people who haven't met Techno before wouldn't notice it. None of the Players around them, mingling amongst themselves and waiting for the portal to open, seem to.

But Phil knows. Things are worse than he'd thought. Oh, they are running out of time.

And yet Techno still brightens when Phil makes his way over to him, and he tilts his head down to Phil in a greeting, and there's a smile beneath that mask, soft and familiar.

"Hey," Techno says, still soft, still kind. "Almost thought you weren't coming."

Phil almost hadn't. But he'd promised Techno, and the feather is in his pocket, and he's been hyping himself up for this all week, and, and—

Yet he can't do it.

"Well, here I am," Phil says, and pulls his hands out of his pockets, and spreads them, open and empty. There is a sinking in his chest but it's fine, there are better places than a public lobby to be doing this. He will find a better time.

Phil does not, in fact, find a better time.

After the server opens they're distracted by the sophistication of it. It doesn't feel like a new world that's more translucent than it is opaque. It doesn't even feel like Keemstar's championship world, solid but with a rawness that's more potential than reality.

No, the skies here have proper depth, and when Phil peeks into the nearby stream the water of the babbling brook fractures light like the world's been here for years.

"They're living up to their reputation," Techno huffs in amusement beside him. He's scuffing the heel of a boot in the dirt and hitching up a leg to inspect the soil stuck to it. "Might be a proper home server at some point."

Gods, isn't that trippy. But that brings up a good point. "The purpose of the server was to conquer, you said?"

"Yeah." Techno flashes him a smile, a grin with teeth, and instinctively—helplessly—Phil returns it. "There'll be opportunities for negotiations and expansions and influence, all that good stuff. But not everyone who's joining are gonna be conquerors, Phil—can't be, by definition."

It's not the way Phil would have put it, but Techno's right. Phil cracks his neck and sighs, straightens. "Well?" The portal had dropped them off in the heart of the world, and there's a lot of land in all directions. It'll take them quite a bit of walking before they hit the sea. "Which way do you want to go?"

And loveable, practical, straightforward Techno—he eyes their soon-to-be competitors, clasps a hand on Phil's shoulder, and smiles. "South, of course."

The spire at the center of the world starts fading into the horizon, as they start making progress over land.

Phil gets to catch up with Techno again, as they pass through plains and wind through valleys in mountain ranges. The air is crisp and the sun is warm and they've still got some time in their head start, before they'll have to worry about the rest of the server's first-day folks coming after their heads.

The conversation eases something in Phil's chest. He's still got it. They've still got it. His hand is crumpling the feather in his pocket and it hurts, but the pain brings him back in, has him focusing on what's important.

The colors of this newly forged world are bright but Techno's next to him, and he's laughing. There's a spring in his step and an eagerness to his eye, even as they're getting near the edge of the continent where they'll have to split up to make their own ways south.

"What're you thinkin' of doing first?" he asks, eyeing the volcano in the distance they're passing with some thought. Phil tries to recall the map they'd been shown before they'd joined, and finds he only vaguely remembers it. "I'm prob'bly gonna go and get some resources. Antarctica's a long way south, and most people are stickin' closer to the equator."

For the warmth, and to stay at the heart of the world. They're planning on expanding outwards, but Phil'd seen the people who are making alliances there. They're all young for the most part. And there are, of course, the server admins who'd thought up this big dream in the first place.

“I think I’ll go a little northwest,” Phil says. There’s a small island there, where the climate will be similar to the extreme south. He might as well get used to the cold while checking out the volcano there. “If we’re lucky, we can hit both volcanos at the same time while everyone else is still getting their bearings.”

Techno snorts, and it’s not cold enough for it to plume in the air just yet, but Phil can imagine it. The sharp grin below the mask, he doesn’t have to. “You don’t have to put it like that, Phil, you know they’re doing their best.”

“I’m just saying, mate, if they haven’t done their homework then that’s on them!”

“It’s a new world.”

“And the invitation and the map have been out for *how* long?”

“Touché,” Techno says, and he snickers, and Phil feels the victory of it like a blooming flower between his ribs.

“More seriously though.” This world is new—different—in that the Nether and the End have been cut off from its inhabitants, except in special areas or circumstances. Still, there are things that need to be done first if they want to get ahead of the game. “Diamonds first, and then a rendezvous at the south pole?”

“Mmhm.” Techno cracks his neck, rolls his shoulders. He gives Phil a considering look from behind the mask. There is a pause.

There is a moment, and Phil literally has his hand on his feather, if he can just pluck up the courage and screw it into his hands—all he’d need to do is remove his hand from his pocket —all he’d have to do is *say*—

But he is a coward, and he’d known that already.

The moment passes. Techno, bless him, continues as though there hadn’t been one: “Wanna bet who can finish up first?”

And this is easy. The banter is easy.

“You’re on,” Phil says, and swallows down the bitterness.

Phil encounters a spot of trouble while caving in the maw of the volcano, but it’s nothing he can’t handle. Either way, he wonders how Techno’s doing. If it keeps his mind off the fact that the volcano is hot, like the Nether but not, and that there is only so much air he can gain in here where the walls are sloped and there are no ways out except for up—well.

Every time Techno messages him, Phil snatches up his communicator despite himself.

Some of them are more innocuous messages—a note about the rate at which he’s found emeralds, or one commenting about the movement of the other factions on the map. A picture

of his own volcano, with his own soot-stained fingers in the frame, soft, unthinking of ‘niceties’.

We’ve gotta make our own faction, he says later, when Phil’s got enough iron to make armor and enough diamond for a sword. *The others have already started linking up.*

And they don’t need to, technically—the first day is a grace period, where everyone will have a chance to settle in and stake their claims—but it would make it official. It would announce to the server, beyond rumors, beyond doubt, just whose side Phil is on.

Got any ideas for a faction name? Phil asks, because he knows Techno. He’ll have plenty, some of them meaningful, others just because he knows it’ll get a laugh.

But Techno doesn’t immediately reply. And that’s fine, he’s busy, and Phil’s busy too, digging out the lapis in the floor with a pickaxe. They won’t need it immediately, but they’ll need it later for enchanting things, and Techno likes his armor and weaponry to be magicked within an inch of their lives. Better to get it now while Phil’s already here.

Eventually his communicator chimes the four-note tone that he’d set specifically for Techno. Phil rushes over to where he’d stashed it and remembers at the last minute to wipe the worst of the ash and blood off his hands before he reaches for it, because if not he’ll have to take time later to clean it and what if he misses something in the meantime? Techno is capable, but there’s no point in taunting fate.

I want to be fancy, Techno has said when Phil gets himself together enough to read it. *Something that means business. If we’re playing this game then I’m playing to win, man.*

Phil remembers the glee on his face. And—maybe just giving back the feather isn’t enough. The first time around Phil had gifted it on Techno’s birthday, and it had been *meaningful*, and it had been everything he’d wanted out of giving that part of his soul to Techno—the reassurance, the physical representation, the plain fact that he knows Techno understands the significance, somehow—but this time he’s not just giving it away.

He’s also apologizing. Making up for his mistakes.

And Phil hadn’t known what Techno would have wanted for his birthday back in Hypixel, but it’s different now. They’re on a server, where it is physically and completely possible for Phil to promise him the world and actually follow through on it.

Lay it on me, Phil texts back, and thinks about the server map and the jaw-dropping breadth of the landmasses, the sheer size of the world. It’s a princely gift for anybody, let alone someone who is the closest to Phil’s soul. *What did you want to call us?*

He waits and stares at the screen, the little indicator that Techno is offline—and then idle—and then typing and about to reply to him.

The Antarctic Empire, Techno says, and before Phil can even reply he’s adding: *I know it’s pretty basic, just named after the landmass down south, but it’s intimidating. It’ll make people think twice before messing with us, just glancing at the serverboard.*

The Antarctic Empire. It's a good name for a new day, a new chapter, and it's certainly one that'll make an impact. It's a good name, moreover, to conquer the world with.

Does that make you an Emperor? Phil teases, because he knows it'll make Techno laugh.

Technically yes, but can't exactly be an emperor in a land with two people.

Phil remembers the gossip on Hypixel, the way the masses chant the blood god's name, the unnerving attention of the End and the very universe peeking through Phil's home world to watch his friend.

Probably won't be just two people for long, and I'm not including the future conquering.

You're putting a lot of faith in this, Techno says, and Phil can practically hear the snort.

But no. That's not it. *I just have faith in you.*

Phil comes up out of the volcano to the sight of the sun setting, and it knocks the wind out of him.

The colors are right, subdued and pale and dull and vibrant in turns, instead of being too-bright or too-wild in the way of new worlds. When Phil runs his fingers over the bark of a tree and plucks an autumn leaf from a branch, it crumbles between Phil's fingers like they should, flaking into dust.

Techno's right—among other things, this server has the potential to be home. It's safe enough, for a given definition of safe, and the respawn magic is fully charged and clearing out the clouds in the sky.

He's marveling over the crispness of it when he runs into Fit again. Or rather, when there's a dull droning—steady and mechanical—that makes Phil look up, and it's Fit leaning out of the pilot's seat, waving.

"Didn't think I'd see you here!" Fit says, when he's landed and Phil is running his hand over the metal of the plane. He's got one elbow hitched up and his cheek braced on his fist, and he's smirking again like he knows something Phil doesn't. "They didn't tell me they'd invited you!"

"I got one through Techno," Phil tells him, and smiles when Fit blinks first. That satisfied, Phil jumps up so that he can sit on the wing of the plane and face Fit properly as they talk. "But what about you? I thought you were gonna stick close to 2b2t."

Fit snorts and shakes his head. "Nah, I wanted to see something different. Check out a new world."

"Miss your days of taking over shit?"

"Maybe a little bit of that," Fit admits, and smirks. "But I see you're on someone else's faction."

Ah, the dreaded interrogation. This isn't Keemstar's competition, there's not exactly an opportunity for Phil to distract Fit and make a run for it—he's got his wings, sure, but Fit has a *plane*. And Phil is plenty fast, but he doesn't want to make the server admins mad just yet—even if they're ascended ones—by bending the rules this early.

Which leaves only one option here. Phil runs his tongue over his teeth and resigns himself to it. "What about it?"

"It's the faction of the kid who calls you Phil, *Philza*." Fit doesn't move, he's not winding end crystals between his fingers, but Fit's never been dangerous just because of those. "What, I'm not allowed to be curious?"

And Fit is a good man, when he wants to be—he's not asking Phil because he's pissed. He's just worried. Still. "You're not allowed to harass him about it, no."

"I thought that was rather obvious, y'know, after the whole *thing* in the last round where you killed me for getting even close to him."

"That was a paired duel," Phil replies mildly. He doesn't shake out his wings or spread them, but it's a close thing. "Fair's fair."

"And y'know I'm not holding any grudge, Philza, but really? Him? He's a kid."

Phil opens his mouth and then closes it. Chews over his thoughts for a moment. Eventually he says, "Not really a kid."

The triumphant expression falls off Fit's face. "What?"

"You heard me. He looks young, and from all accounts he *seems* young, but—"

There are only two people who would understand Phil's concerns, and one of them is currently sitting in front of him in the cockpit of the very plane whose wing Phil is balanced on.

"He's not young," Phil says at last, "in the same way Jordan's not really our age. Or well, not the same way *exactly*, but close enough."

Fit leans back slowly. "Are you sure you should be having this conversation with me?"

"Well, you were the one who made the decision to drop out of the sky and flag me down."

"Hey, you're the one with *wings*. I'm the one with what's technically a fake pair!"

But the banter loosens something that Phil hadn't known was bothering him, and he slumps forward, elbows on his knees, his head braced on his laced fingers and hands.

"It sings for him," Phil murmurs, and he knows that Fit knows what he means.

Silence. Phil closes his eyes. And then: "Like I said, why are you talking about this with me?"

“You were going south.” Phil knows the placement of the sun and the direction it is currently sinking into the horizon, the heading of Fit’s flight path before he’d noticed that Phil had been resting in the icy hills below him. “You know why.”

“Well.” There’s a quiet rustle, as Fit shifts in his seat. “I did see a message for a new faction called the *Antarctic* Empire go up, whose leader and co-leader are the winners of the last big combat tournament.”

And if Fit had been on his way, then others must be too. People know of Technoblade, even if they don’t of Phil, and they will be expecting the Empire to be a military powerhouse. The Antarctic will have visitors knocking on their door soon, whether it’s friendlies looking for alliances or enemies looking to sabotage them.

“And if you want to talk to Jordan about it, he’s here too.”

Phil flutters his wings before he catches himself. His head still jerks up, too surprised to do anything about that. “Jordan?”

“Yeah.”

Damn. Well. Phil stares. It might be harder than he’d thought to offer Techno the world, then. But that doesn’t mean he can just *give up*.

First things first, though. He’s got to meet up with Techno, before the rest of the server gets it into their heads that there’s a fight to be getting into without Phil.

“I’ll track down Jordan later,” Phil decides, and swings himself into the co-pilot seat next to Fit. The man squawks, but that’s easy enough to ignore while re-arranging his limbs to actually fit comfortably inside the plane and not just on the wing. “Now come on, you were on your way to Antarctica, weren’t you? Why don’t you give me a ride?”

The skies are sprawling overhead when they make it to the south pole; to Techno.

Phil jumps out of the plane when he spots the campfire on top of the mountain, and doesn’t pay any mind to Fit’s surprised shouting—the guy’s capable, he can find a place to land without Phil holding his hand. And better to get that heads up to Techno, anyway, even though Phil had shot off a text while Fit had been navigating the southern oceans.

He glides down, and oh, there’re some pretty good winds here. Some of the ones in the upper atmosphere are going to be too strong, he can already tell, but the rest are serviceable.

It’s enough for Phil to spiral his way down to Techno, who is standing next to his campfire, hands on his hips, patient.

It’s only been hours since Phil’d seen Techno last. But seeing him in iron armor, rough and worn but still with that easy grace on his feet, it feels like it’s been longer.

“What took you so long?” Techno asks, as soon as Phil’s hit the ground. He steps up, hands up, already reaching for Phil’s bag to take it from him—and then he pauses. If he squints,

Phil can't see it, not with the mask. "Are you *injured?*"

What?

"Hell's bells, Phil." Techno swipes the bag from him, drops it next to the one by the fire, and roughly shoves Phil's cloak aside to grab at his arm. His hands are warm and he is warm, and Phil feels himself slumping over without meaning to, just a little. "You're bleeding."

Oh. "That's from when I was caving," Phil tells him, and the angle's wrong to check the line of Techno's mouth but he's sure the guy is frowning. "It's not that bad, really."

"*Not that bad*, he says." Techno breathes hard through his nose, and the mist plumes in the air. "Okay. *Sit*."

Phil sits.

Techno proceeds to—fuss is a strong word. Take care of, maybe, and that's how Fit finds them, the two of them next to a campfire with half of Techno's first-aid kit painstakingly dissected in the snow.

"There's Fit," Phil says, and watches Techno's head tilt. He doesn't look up, though, and—his back is to Fit, but Phil's covering the blind spot, and, oh.

Oh.

"Fit didn't say anything about it to me," Phil adds, and hopes his voice isn't shaking.

But Fit shoots back, "What, that little slice on your arm? I've seen worse!" so maybe Phil's got at least some dignity left.

Techno hums, and Fit glances uncertainly between the back of his head and then at Phil, but he's not singing the harmonic melody. It's just a scoffing kind of hum, short and not indictive of a problem at all. "This isn't a *little* slice, oh my god. You both—how do you even function? Do you *want* to get an infection?"

Despite the sharp retort, Techno is gentle as he finishes bandaging up Phil's arm. Phil rotates it when Techno lets go, but the ends are securely tied in place, and no blood wells up to stain it red.

"Not particularly, no," Phil concedes, and smiles when Techno huffs and shakes his head. "Thanks, mate."

Techno looks up. His eyes are glittering behind the mask. "You realize this means I automatically win our competition, right?"

Phil catches himself doing a double-take, but nope, Techno's wearing that shit-eating grin of his now, slow and steady like the rising sun. He's not backing down from this one. Still, Phil has his own pride to salvage. "What do you mean? I've already gotten enough diamonds to forge a sword, mate!"

“And then you came back injured. Also,” Techno adds, when Phil is about to point out that injuries don’t disqualify him, “I have enough for a sword, too, plus a helmet. You’re not the only one, Phil.”

Fit watches Techno fuss with the first-aid kit, putting everything back in its place. His faces —shifts. Phil shifts too, slowly swings his legs around so that he can lunge up and tackle the man if he tries anything, but—no. The expression on Fit’s face isn’t aggressive, or angry, or disappointed at all.

In the firelight, beneath the night sky, he just looks—satisfied. Vindicated.

“Why not join us, Fit?” Phil asks, because it’s Fit and he’s one of his oldest friends and he wants both him and Techno to get along. “You came all the way out here, gave me a ride.”

Techno clicks the kit shut and sets it aside. “You gave Phil a ride?”

“Just a short one.” Fit shakes his head. He hasn’t looked away, and his mouth is doing something complicated that Phil can’t exactly read, but he’s not pulling out his weapons. That’s—promising. “And then Phil jumped out of the plane, the madman, to make it down here faster.”

“Yeah, I saw that bit.” Techno’s sitting close enough to Phil that he can bump shoulders, and he does; Phil feels the edges of the armor even with the cloaks they’re both wearing. But it’s still soft, and it’s fond, and Phil smiles wryly as Techno continues: “Did you find a good spot to park your plane, at least?”

“There’s a decent plateau not far from here. The server’s a weird mix of magic and grit—it disappeared as soon as I walked ten paces away.”

“That’s good to know.” Techno flicks a wrist, and a sword—his usual sword, glinting the ice-blue of plain diamond—materializes in his hand. The wine-dark hues of enchanted netherite overlays it as the two versions try to exist in the same place at once and fail. “I had to forge the sword first, but afterwards I could call it properly. Soon as I get an ingot, I’m going for it.”

“Is it a named sword?”

Techno doesn’t fall for Fit’s fishing question, just inclines his head. He drops the sword to dismiss it. “So, like I told Phil earlier—think people might be looking to settle down here at some point. And I mean *settle*, settle.”

“A home server.” Fit finally sits down, cross-legged by the fire. He blinks slowly. “You think so?”

“If the admins don’t muck up the management, they stand a chance, yeah.” Techno shrugs again and turns away, picking up a stick to poke at the campfire. “It’ll be interesting to watch, at least.”

A princely gift, Phil remembers, and mentally groans. Ah, well. That's fine. A gift with weight behind it is better than a gift with none, and anyway if Phil is going to be doing this then he might as well go all out on it.

"So?" Techno's eyes are burning behind the mask, and Fit freezes beneath the weight of it. Behind it, beside it, Phil resists the urge to snort and stick his tongue out at Fit. "What are your plans on establishing territories?"

"I've got a stake on the western continent," Fit says slowly, carefully, like he's edging out onto ice. There's caution in his voice where there'd been none before, now that he's seeing Techno for Technoblade, not Philza's unexpected friend. "Pretty small right now, but it's pretty warm. A good place to live in, or vacation at."

"Mm." Techno stirs the embers in the campfire to life again, without looking away from their staredown. "And after? When people are fightin' proper?"

"Why, you think we'll dissolve into dogfighting that quickly?"

"I think," Techno says with some amusement, "that people will wanna do some conquerin' themselves. Y'know, a guess, just from looking at the serverboard."

That's true enough. They're not the only ones who have named themselves an *Empire*, not by a long shot. Phil tilts his head back and stares into the sky. The placement of the stars are slightly different here, of course, but the northern star—the brightest one—should still be somewhere near.

Fit shifts in his seat. Puts a hand into his coat. Techno stiffens beside him—just a little, not enough that a stranger would be able to notice, but Phil's got their shoulders pressed together and he can feel the tension as Techno gets ready to move—but all Fit does is pull out a card from an inner pocket.

"I think I want to keep my little country in the warmth," Fit says, but his voice is fond now. *Audibly* fond, the way he never is in the presence of people he doesn't know well. "Why don't I make an alliance with the Antarctic Empire instead? There's some good strategic mileage out of that—a mainland country and an island one."

Phil drops his gaze from the night sky to stare. Techno snorts, chuckles, and leans over to accept the card from Fit.

Over Techno's head as he punches the comm number in, Fit catches Phil's eye and slowly, deliberately, winks.

Fit goes away, and Techno finally pulls Phil by the wrist and shows him what he's been working on. Or rather, what he's been excavating, the true form of the big hulking skyline surrounding them:

There is a stronghold beneath the ice.

Techno shows him around, a glint in his eye, teeth in his smile. The ceilings are high down in the stronghold. The caverns are large. There's enough space for to Phil to hover, even, and there's a drafty wind blowing in from somewhere. Not enough to be a true thermal or a wind to ride, but still enough that Phil doesn't feel claustrophobic.

"The walls'll keep us from gettin' too cold," Techno says, as he wraps up the brief tour and brings them back to the rooms he'd been making habitable while waiting for Phil. "We'll have enough space for us and a few more people, too. I heard from some friends while we were minin'—some who fight, others who won't. Is that—I mean."

Techno pauses for a moment to work his jaw. "You good with that?"

Unspoken: Are you still with me?

He asks as though there is any other answer that Phil could give than *Yes*. And, well. The more people to be helping Phil with his plans of taking over this planet, the better.

"I'm looking forward to meeting them," Phil says, and reaches over to take the lantern from Techno's startled hands.

More people show up as the week goes by, in ones and twos and fours.

Techno greets them with a smile and open arms. He introduces them all to Phil as they arrive, and Philza is reminded of his visit to Hypixel again, in new names and new faces to learn of people he is trying to get to like him.

He's worried at first that he won't get along with them—the stronghold might be large, but the Antarctic is a small continent to be stuck with someone that you hate—but to his surprise, they do. It helps that a surprisingly great number of those who join them are looking for places to stay a while.

And that—the idea that they will stick around on a world that is not their own for so long—is so baffling to him that Phil ends up asking one of the craftsmen who had come at Techno's invitation: "So what prompted you to join?"

They're weaving something when he asks his question, fingers flexing through light and that sparkling rainbow mist of active magic, and they make an inquiring noise at him, half-distracted.

He elaborates: "To come here, I mean." Phil knows Techno; he would have warned them of just what they're getting into. "It's a faction-based server. Power and influence are the name of the game, here."

"Ah." Jabber flicks their fingers, quick and neat, drawing runes in the air that drift down like snowflakes to rest on the chest piece they're enchanting. The magic sinks in with a quiet hiss, etching itself into the diamond like words written by an unseen hand. "You're right. Some people join servers like this to conquer. But others, like me, join for a chance at peaceful fun."

“Peaceful?” Phil asks, and doesn’t bother to hide his surprise.

“Yes. New worlds are some of the best because no one’s fighting yet. There’s no history to defend, no egos to bruise.”

But even as they say that, Jabber’s eyes are already slanting back to Techno, where he’s directing their small crew of stronghold inhabitants in clearing out more ice. Their little group may have the fancy name of an *Empire* but he hasn’t made any overtures towards being a leader just yet—and so has no one else.

The thing is, Techno knows how to grab the attention of a room and keep it. He’d done it before in that first LARP server they’d met on, and he does it at Hypixel, in his competitions, on any stage he’s set on. Sometimes he steps to the side and lets someone else speak, but in the end, people always turn to him. Waiting for his thoughts. For his lead.

Not that Phil blames them. The weight of Techno’s attention is like a gravity well, and Phil knows how intoxicating it can be, to see all that determination and intellect and wit pin you down and inspect you for flaws—and then declare you worthy of his friendship.

“And it’s Techno.” Jabber snickers. “On his side is the safest place to be, isn’t it?”

They’re right. “It’s Techno,” Phil agrees, and wonders which part of the northern continents he’d want first.

Chapter End Notes

Jabber is a reference to one of Technoblade's stream chat moderators.

the curve of destiny approaches

Chapter Summary

> It is an invariable fact of the universe that if one lets down their guard, something must occur in order to disturb that peace.

Chapter Notes

> We start canon diverging from SMPEarth technical lore here, but I'm gonna keep it as close to canon as I can while still allowing myself room to have the findingkairos Original Plot™. I hope you all will enjoy where we're going, though! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Like on his own world, like every other time Philza has ever relaxed a little bit, he forgets: he had been complacent for too long.

It starts subtle. The first week of the server world being opened had passed with little incident, and even when the world messages flicker every so often with factions created and dissolved, alliances forged and broken, no one comes to bother them in the Antarctic.

“It’s ‘cause we’re so far down south,” Techno snickers when Phil points it out to him. Still. He’d gotten his sword forged into netherite three days ago, and his armor enchanted as soon as he’d had the lapis to hand to Jabber. The same with their more vulnerable craftsmen and non-fighting population, really.

Phil watches the movement of people across the map, checks in for updates every hour. But no one comes, and no one challenges them, and Jordan offers them an alliance over video call with the same ease that Fit had, and between the three of them—the Antarctic Empire and Florida and the Kingdom of Jordan, ol’ Captain with his sense of humor—they’ve got enough big names that anyone who challenges them will know better than to do it lightly.

So Phil—relaxes. He’s got his own diamond armor and a netherite sword, of course, but they’ve been making good progress in clearing out the stronghold and the hardest battle he’s had to fight in so far had been in making Techno sit down and eat. And even that is easy enough when Phil mentions that he’s made food for everyone, and it’s good to take a break when the rest of their faction does, and anyway these are all people that have known Techno longer than they’ve known Phil.

Techno eats. Phil watches him eat, and ladles more stew into his bowl when he isn't looking, and drapes a wing around Techno's back for all the things he can't put into words.

Techno's people watch them with something like amusement and something like confusion and everything like surprise.

Phil doesn't pull away, though, and Techno leans back into the wing. He's warm, a line of heat that Phil breathes slowly through the shiver of. It's just Techno.

One of Techno's people tracks him down later that night to grab him by the shoulders and practically shake him. "How do you do it," they demand. Their eyes are wide, their hair is frazzled. "*How do you do it*."

"C'mon, Sky," Jabber says, trying to pry fingers off Phil's shoulders. They give Phil an apologetic look. "You remember manners, right? Social interaction? You can ask questions without—"

"*How*. Do you get him to *eat*."

Phil blinks. "What?"

"He *eats*," Sky says, still fighting off their Jabber's restraining grip. "But he either doesn't pick, or he picks from a terrifyingly short list of foods. Never in the years I've known him has he just—*asked for something specific*."

"Mate." Phil doesn't understand, but then again, Plancke and the other Hypixel admins had said that too. "I've just made that stew for him a couple of times," mostly when Techno had been feeling sentimental over rabbit for whatever reason, but Phil thinks it has something to do with late nights pouring over maps together and that's something he's not quite ready to share with anyone yet. "If he just—picks from a list like you say, then—maybe it just made it onto his list?"

"No, no, you don't understand." Sky shakes him again, and doesn't even seem to notice Jabber who has given up on being nice and is instead trying to haul them off of Phil now, fingers be damned. "I have to give him the list, and he picks. *He doesn't ask*."

"Oh."

"Yeah, *oh*." Jabber has finally managed to put both arms under Sky's armpits and bodily lift them, but Sky's eyes still bore into Phil like a drill. "So I swear to everything that is holy, Philza Minecraft, I have no idea who you are and I don't know why you're here but if you do *anything* to fuck this up I will—"

"Not do anything," Jabber interrupts, but the look they give Phil is sharp. "Save the threats for when we need 'em, Sky."

Sky hisses, like a cat. It's actually pretty impressive.

But this is an easy enough promise to give. "I'll do my very best not to," Phil swears, and the vow etches itself into his ribs with a familiar burst of heat. He ignores it, because this is

important. “I promise.”

The first indication that anything is wrong is when their outpost guard doesn’t check in.

That’s not unusual. Of the people here, only Phil and Techno are really combatants. They’re supposed to get some of Techno’s more combat-oriented friends soon, according to him, but they’ve been delayed. Either way, it’s the two of them. They’ve got this.

It becomes rapidly apparent that they have not, in fact, got this.

Like the cowards they are, their infiltrators go after the non-combatants first. The second indication that something is wrong is when Jabber stumbles into the room, pale, wide-eyed, hands raised, and with a knife at their throat.

“Put down your arms,” says the woman who is holding the knife, calm even in the face of Techno stretching to his full height and Phil going for his own weaponry. “I’ve got people overtaking the rest of the stronghold as we speak, and I’ve got a hostage. Put down your arms.”

“Don’t you *dare*,” Jabber hisses, and even though they’re pale their mouth is in the grim line of a blooded soldier. “We’ve got bedspawn charged and prepped, Techno, you know that, don’t you—”

“Easy there,” Techno says, and he doesn’t ever talk over other people but he does now. Phil looks to the door but no, there’s no one else coming in. All this lady’s got is a hostage and two pissed off warriors who are ready and willing to take her head off for it. “We don’t want any accidents, alright?”

“Techno, I swear—”

“Drop your weapons,” the woman says, mild as milk. “We just want access to what’s in the stronghold, nothing else.”

“Then why do you need us to disarm?” Phil asks. Techno is scuffing his boot on the floor, and he’s got his mask on like he always does these days but the woman is a stranger, she won’t know how to read where his eyes are looking beneath it. If they can coordinate this right—“You can just take Jabber and saunter on over to wherever you want to go, right?”

“Because we’ve heard the rumors, *Technoblade*.” She’s got a firm grip on Jabber and the knife but she jerks her chin at Techno, and the look she gives him is challenging. “Nah, I feel like playing it safe. Drop. Your. Weapons.”

Phil draws his scabbard slowly from his belt. The woman’s attention moves to him for a split second, of course, at the sound, at the inherent threat in it, and in that moment she misses Techno lunging forward.

Phil snags Jabber in the scuffle and hauls them both back. They’re shaking—adrenaline, fear, Phil checks the dropped knife on instinct but there’s no sheen of magic or poison on its edge

—and when he tries to stash them in the back corner where they'll be safe, they clutch onto his sleeve with whitened knuckles.

"Here," they say, as Techno ends the fight with a sword through the stranger's heart behind them. "He's gonna—yeah, she's gone, but I managed to snatch this off her when she manhandled me—"

It's a token, stamped with a sigil and edges glinting with tiny runes. "You stole her *homing coin*?" Phil asks, surprised and partly in awe, because any good Player versed in combat should have noticed when they'd been pickpocketed—but then again, these are limited to the server planet. It's only been a week.

Jabber grins up at him, before their knees give out. Phil manages to catch them before they land too roughly and helps them slide down the wall to the rug-covered floor. "Yeah. Easy to do when your fingers gotta be nimble for fine spellwork, you know." They giggle, and it's high pitched and just a little shaky. Adrenaline crash, then.

Phil takes off his cloak—heavy with enchantments and nothing like Techno's, and it's giving up a surprise advantage over their enemies but alas, they'll just have to be quick about it—and pulls it over Jabber, before he turns.

Techno's long since cleaned his sword and sheathed it. His eyes are burning bright behind the mask. The shadows curl around his feet. If his crown is singing, Phil can't hear it over the rush of blood in his own ears.

But he can hear Techno well enough, fresh off a kill and the death that lingers in the air: "Jabber, you good?"

"All good," they manage. "Phil has the coin—"

Right. Phil flicks it between his fingers and then tosses it to Techno, who catches it without looking away from Jabber. It's only when they give him a thumbs up that he turns away to check the coin.

"I don't recognize the faction."

"It's Kara Corvus's," Phil tells him. The emblem's unmistakable. "Corvarian Empire. They've got land up north. *Far* north, past Jordan's land."

"They came all the way here?" Techno bares his teeth in reluctant amusement. "What're the chances they've set their beds nearby?"

"They would've had to *transport* a bed all the way here," but they wouldn't need a bed, just a waypoint. The hardest part for them would have been putting it in a defensible position, when the Antarctic Empire's outpost towers high into the sky and gives them a bird's eye view of the landscape for kilometers around. "Would the others have communicators on them?" If they can check in, coordinate—

“Yes, but too risky. Makes noise. They don’t keep comms on silent.” Techno flips the coin over his knuckles in thought. “Might just have to go in quick and hit heavy.”

“That always works.” Sometimes it works eerily well. “But—”

“We’ll just kill whoever threatens them,” Techno says, easily, immediately. No hesitation. “Jabber, can you move?”

Better to bring the vulnerable with them than leave them in the open, true. Phil glances throughout the room, trying to pinpoint a good place to barricade.

But Jabber’s already saying, “Yeah.” They haul themself off the wall, and though they lean against it for a long moment, they straighten soon enough. They’re still pale, but they’re holding steady. The real crash will be later, but that’s—for later.

“Here.” Techno strides over to the hole in the wall that hadn’t been there three days ago. Phil follows, curious, but so does Jabber. “It’s still a little rough, but it’s got vents and everythin’, it’s all set up to be a bunker.”

A bunker?

“Again?” Jabber laughs, a little shaky. Phil positions himself so that he can catch them if they fall again. “Oh, Techno. You don’t change.”

“What can I say.” Techno finds what he’d been looking for and must press something, because there’s a click and then a quiet rumble and then an entire section of the wall next to them sliding down like it’s a door. “If it works, it works.”

This *definitely* hadn’t been here three days ago. Phil stares.

Jabber limps into the *vault*, because that is what it is, lined in obsidian and complete with chests stacked against the walls, and slumps into a pile of canvas on the floor. “With vents, you said?”

“Yeah. Tiny ones set into the side of the mountain, so if you’re in here you won’t suffocate. Don’t leave until we come for you, alright?”

“Are you gonna be sending everyone here?”

“If we can.” Techno crouches in front of Jabber and tucks the homing coin into their hand. “You got your communicator?”

Jabber has to pat around their pockets for a minute, but eventually manages to find it. “You’ll have them text me?”

“See, you already know the plan.” Techno looks up to Phil where he lingers by the door. “You need anythin’, Phil? All set?”

Phil blinks and pulls himself back into the present by force. There will be time enough to rib Techno about his habits later, and to mull over the surprising clench in his stomach at the

thought that there's still worlds left in Techno for Phil to discover. "All set."

"Then let's go."

They sweep through the first handful of intruders they find. They seem so young, Phil ponders to himself, as he plays cleanup to Techno's brutal charge. None of them are in full netherite, though there is the occasional indigo armor piece or sword.

A lot of them use axes, too, though those are large and unwieldy and easy to disarm. Phil collects a handful of them as they secure the immediate area around them at the heart of the stronghold, before moving upwards.

"We're clearing it in reverse," Techno muses, as he kneels by the dropped items of the last Player to have seen his shieldless state and made the erroneous assumption that Techno would be any more vulnerable. "Like a fortress, but from the bottom to the top."

"Kinda, yeah." Phil plants his sword in the stone even though it's terrible for the edge to lean against it, because there are stars in Techno's shadows and they're blinking at Phil with something too much like sentience for him to be comfortable. He shakes out his wings—maybe it's time to invest in some armor for them again. "Are we missing anyone else?"

They'd sent Sky and a few others packing for Techno's bunker, and if Phil's counted all of them right, that should be all of them. It's odd, though. The first woman they'd seen had been so confident in her team's capabilities of storming their stronghold, but there hasn't been enough men, in Phil's opinion, to back that up.

"Nah." Techno pauses where he's kneeling, hand hovering over the scattered items. "Hey, Phil."

Phil does a spot-check on autopilot. There are no mobs and they've cleaned out the intruders in this section, there shouldn't be alarm in Techno's voice. He spreads his wings, just in case. "What is it?"

"Any of the others that we've killed—did they have TNT on them?"

"No." Does that mean—

Techno withdraws a stick of TNT from within the pack, carefully handling it as though it were lit. "What did that woman say she wanted? The stronghold?"

"Something *in* the stronghold." There's only one thing that Phil can think of that would qualify as something they'd risk war over, but this can't be the only stronghold scattered on the planet. And either way, the point is moot. The End is cut off from the people here, Phil can sense it, and the admins had confirmed it on the very first day—oh, but if they'd thought the admins had been lying—

"Why explosives, though?" Techno tucks the stick away, stands, turns.

"Because if we can't have it," their errant guest says, "neither can you."

Phil pulls his sword from the stone, brings it to bear, slides over so that he's covering Techno's back. Techno doesn't move, busy staring down the woman who's turned the corner, bloody and grim.

"You respawned," he says, and Phil bites the inside of his own cheek to refrain from flinching back at the coldness of it. He knows it's not directed at him, he *knows*, but—the sudden temperature drop has nothing to do with the natural climate.

It's the same woman who'd first shown up holding Jabber hostage, and she doesn't seem to notice. "You thought we didn't prepare for this?" she hisses, with enough venom to make both poison and antidote. "We're bold, not stupid."

"That just means," Techno says, ever-patient, "that I can threaten you with bedtrapping, can't I? Now what do you mean, *if you can't have it*."

"It's unfair!" She doesn't have any of her weapons, but she gestures widely and the grin she gives them is cocky and self-assured. "The most powerful person on the server, with alliances across the world, with the stronghold and *access to the End*? The rest of us need to work and eat, Technoblade. This is just—preemptive measures."

Phil doesn't know if this is Kara Corvus herself, but it doesn't matter.

"So you're—what, tryna stop us from takin' over the world?" Techno snorts. "That's kinda the point of the planet."

"You don't need the stronghold to do that." And it makes sense: outnumbered and outplanned, in the face of overwhelming disadvantage, they would do anything in their power to level the field. Phil would do that. He and Techno definitely have done that, even though it'd been to the point of overkill.

She smiles, all silk and sunshine. "Also the benefit of crippling your manpower. So what will you do, Technoblade?" She holds out a hand, and—*fuck*, she's holding—

"Let go of the button," Techno says, and his stance has changed. His feet are braced wide like he's about to lunge. The star-eyes are many and blinking now, and—

Phil usually stays catty-corner to Techno, the better to protect his blind spot and his back, so it means he sees the transformation only when it hits his hands, his shoulders, his very frame. Techno grows taller in the same way that shadows grow longer as the sun sets, all slow smoothness that is inevitable. He's not wearing his cloak and it lets Phil see the two lines of light that draw themselves from shoulder-blade to rib, sweep out in an arc, and shake out the —void.

They're shaped like dragon wings, and that makes the breath catch in Phil's throat; but the universe peers through Techno's wings, and that's where logic stops.

"Let go of the button," Techno says, but there is static under his voice and he is a head and a half taller than normal and his fingernails are the outstretched arms of spiral galaxies and the outline of the mask has faded into a constellation that hovers around his face.

Phil is too late, but Techno isn't shrieking in pain yet, so maybe they can have this. Maybe the universe will be kind for once and let his σύναστρο be one of the lucky ones.

The intruder gapes like a fish out of water. The dead man's switch drops from her hand.

Phil darts forward but Techno is already there, faster, stronger, and he sweeps Phil under his wings and then for a moment it's like he's back—in his own world, flying upside down, staring into the swathe of the stars in his night sky.

But Techno's here, and his breath puffs on Phil's cheek, all unnatural cold that's enough to frost, and Phil blinks and sees only stars, and then—

The earth shudders beneath their feet.

"Damn it," Techno snarls, but he deposits Phil gently back on the ground. He's gone in the next moment, leaving only a trail of starlight behind him.

What. "Fuckin' *what*," Phil asks no one, and of course no one answers him.

So. "*Fuck*," Phil says, because it makes him feel better, and then does the only thing he can: chase after Techno.

They find where their *lovely* intruders with their *lovely* explosives have set their bedspawns.

Or rather, Techno finds them. Phil finds him braced over them all as they huddle together, terrified.

"You're gonna tell me exactly why you thought this was a *good idea*," Techno is snarling, and the screaming underharmonics to his voice make half of them clutch their ears and the other half flinch. "'cause if we hadn't put everyone in a safe place you woulda trapped them in the collapse and killed them—people who aren't even *combatants*."

Silence. And then one of them says "Aw, *shit*," and that breaks the dam on the rest of them. It probably doesn't help that Techno's shifted into the kind of nightmare that looks like it kills for fun and eats souls to get stronger.

Techno doesn't follow through with his threat of bedtrapping, though. It's a pity, but then again, it's only been a week. Phil understands that they can't exactly make enemies this early, but the Corvarians had come into *their home* and tried to *blow it up*. They hadn't succeeded, thankfully, but there's more ice than stone pillars holding up the structural integrity right now and after only a few days of knowing Sky, Phil can practically hear their offended screeching about it.

Ah, well. Phil texts Fit and Jordan while Techno's distracted, sets something up. He's got his wings and if he's quick about it, he might be able to beat the both of them to the Corvarian Empire's base tonight, even without nicking the homing coin off of Jabber.

Either way, he puts his comm aside when Techno finishes up his monologue. The Corvarians are satisfyingly pale at the end of it, even the ruthless and bold woman who'd been the one

they'd first killed for daring to take one of their own hostage.

"And I hadn't been plannin' on goin' to war this early," he adds. There are stars caught in his rose gold hair but his teeth are sharp and his jaw has shifted and he is tall, so tall, and Phil realizes—oh.

This must be what that first server had seen, to call him a monster.

The blood god smiles. "But if you want a *war*, then I'll be happy to give you one."

"They're all young and dumb," Phil interrupts, because it's true he's got his comm all prepped to declare the Corvarians an enemy, but there's nothing like a good ambush to get things rolling. "Why don't we let 'em go home and stew in their mistakes for a while?"

They hadn't brought an actual bed. It's always a little more work, respawning with only a waypoint's magic to rely on, and it shows in their pale faces and the way they scramble away when Phil stalks forward, wings mantled. If he's bleeding a little of himself into the surroundings, well, Techno's been plenty flashy so far. Why not give them a show?

"And tell your leader," he adds, because he's got a guess for why they'd risked this entire thing, "that we don't have access to the End, either. So she's gone all this way for nothing."

"You both have *wings*," one of them—the boldest one—gasps. Her eyes are wide and she's trying to be triumphant, but there's too much terror in her to be really fooling Phil.

"These?" Techno snorts and shakes his head. "We got 'em fair and square the hard way."

"The hard way?" She audibly gulps. "You mean—"

Phil raises his netherite sword and plunges it through the waypoint. It shatters and fractures into neat little pieces; probably overkill, but eh. Sometimes a little bit of dramatics is good.

Techno takes care of the rest with one sweep of his own sword, and too soon, they're standing alone, the only sound being the Player blood dissipating into light with its innocuous little tinkle.

Phil doesn't know how to break the silence. Techno coughs. Eventually he says, "So, uh. Surprise, I have wings?"

Phil says the first thing that comes to mind, which is, "Mate, then why did I have to teach you how to preen?"

That breaks the tension. Techno grins sheepishly, and there are stars caught on the outline of his teeth. "I keep 'em dragon wings, Phil. Feathers might be traditional but they're not armored at all. At least scales give you some of the protection you're givin' up by goin' without a chest plate."

That makes sense. But then—"And the bit with the universe?"

Techno blinks slowly. He's folding his wings away, now, but his mask is still glowing and Phil's pretty sure if he looks down, his shadow will still be disobeying the laws of common sense. "What?"

"You know." Phil gestures helplessly, up and down, trying to encompass the whole of Techno's—everything. "The transformation."

His σύναστρο's voice is carefully even, all emotion pressed out of it, when he says slowly: "Phil. I'm a shapeshifter. What do you mean, transformation?"

And it's true, as he speaks the shape of Techno's ears are reverting, his jaw creaking quietly back into place. But his nails, now that Phil looks again, are the light pink of mortal flesh, and he doesn't seem to notice the binary star system winking out next to his cheekbone.

If this is real—if this is true, if Techno hasn't realized just how much he's not purely Player anymore; if he can't see his own mantle of stars—then, oh, Phil's been wrong this entire time. He has both more and less time to stop being a coward.

It also means that he's the only one who's revealed himself to the Corvarians, but that's workable. That's fine. He suppresses the instinctual fear that tries to crawl up, because this server world is protected and everyone who joins is on the record. There's no reason to think that word will spread.

In the meantime—

"I must have been seeing things," Phil answers, and feels the lie of it sting the back of his throat, but what can he do? What else is there to do? How does he even start that conversation? "Never mind me, mate. So, uh. Why do you keep 'em concealed, then?" Even during that first LARP server, he hadn't ever volunteered his own capacities for flight. He'd been planning around the lack of air superiority, until Phil had shown up and made it possible.

Techno—looks away. "A couplea reasons," he tells the arctic landscape, and Phil swallows down his immediate back peddling. He wants to know. He wants to listen. "But really, Phil—I dunno how you do it. You're goin' around with your heart on your sleeve, you know."

That comes out more truthfully than he'd wished, if the little wince behind the mask means anything. Phil licks his lips and tries to pull his thoughts together into something coherent. "Kind of, yeah," he admits, because first things first: Techno is right. It is a little dangerous, a lot a taunt, when he can feel the wind through every feather and the spatter in every potion ring his very soul. "But you know me—" simultaneously the shortest and the longest amount of time that Phil's known anyone, "—I couldn't give up flying even if I tried."

"Well," Techno says, and there's a smile lingering in his voice, "that's true. You're kinda addicted to flying, aren't you?"

"Healthier than an addiction to anything else, mate, isn't it?"

It's a poor attempt at a joke, but Techno snorts all the same. He shakes his head. Kicks out a foot, and starts to fold away his wings—but then pauses, when he catches Phil staring at them.

"That was all posturin'," Techno says. He sounds annoyed, a little chagrinned. "Woulda rather not have revealed that for an *invasion*, but if I'm lucky they'll think they were hallucinatin'."

That's not why Phil is staring, though. It's just—"Do you even take care of them?"

"From time to time." Techno scratches at his mask, but he doesn't take it off. A vice tightens in Phil's chest, but that's all past mistakes, and he's not supposed to ask first, but Techno's already had his hands in Phil's wings before and if—if he's reading this right—

"I'll preen your wings," Phil offers in a rush, trying to get the words out before they stick, "if you'll preen mine?"

Techno—stills, in the way he does on battlefields, in the way he's never done with Phil before. Phil freezes too, doesn't make a move for any of his weapons, doesn't bolt for the arctic hills. Just waits.

Eventually, Techno lets his wings lie flat on his back instead of dismissing them. "Sure," he says, and sighs, and Phil lets go of the breath he'd been holding, too. "That sounds good."

"Okay," Phil answers, and Techno smiles.

"Okay."

Side by side, they make it back to the stronghold.

The repairs take more time than they'd anticipated.

Techno keeps his wings out for all of it. He'd walked into everyone's surprise but no one's anger, even though both Jabber and Sky had given Phil considering looks.

Still. No one makes a big deal about it. They treat them all the same, and as days go by Techno stops holding himself so tightly wound.

His crown still hums, though, and Phil worries about it even as he sneaks out every so often to terrorize people with Fit and Jordan. It's like the bad old days all over again, even though ol' Cap swears that he's done with the shenanigans now and Fit keeps himself from the more destructive uses of end crystals.

But whatever's going on with the *blood for the blood god* deification process, his hands are still gentle on Phil's wings. He's still dry wit and deadpan humor and quiet care for the people who claim him as their own. He is nothing like the warmonger or bloodthirsty warrior that their enemies think is hungry only for victory, and—at least they still have that.

He’s still the kind of person who says, apropos of nothing, “I kinda want honeyed milk,” and gets up to stop Phil from taking out a plane to Africa.

“Phil, you really don’t need to—”

“No, we need honey blocks anyway, don’t we? We’re just speeding up the timeline a little—”

“Phil, just because I want honeyed milk *now* doesn’t mean you need to *get it* now—”

“I’m with Phil,” Jabber says, and Sky raises their hand and weighs in too, and that’s at least three votes against Techno.

Phil smiles and places his hand on Techno’s dark-sky wing and treasures the warmth when Techno doesn’t pull away. “You want honeyed milk, I’m *getting* you honeyed milk, mate. Now sit tight and wait, I won’t be too long.”

Techno huffs, but it’s soft and fond. “Phil. We don’t even have cows!”

“An oversight, really. The chickens can only take us so far. And you and I have seen the trunks in the planes, okay, I bet I can fit at least four or five in there—”

“And they’ll suffocate if you do.”

“Not if they know what’s good for them,” Phil says, because what’s a little living without bending the rules? The Corvarians have already dragged them into war, and Techno will always appreciate more people clamoring to form alliances with them, even if Phil doesn’t exactly explain *where* their fear-filled requests are coming from.

And anyway, they’re cows. If Phil can’t get away with it when it comes to animals, then they’ve got a different problem.

Chapter End Notes

In case you missed it: the wing lore, in (almost) all my works, is that they are a gift from the universe when someone ~~worthy~~ has adventured on a Hardcore world, made it to the End, killed the dragon, and taken the leap of faith into the Well. Their appearances are whatever the Player wants them to be, whether that's feathered, scaled, greyscale, colored vibrantly, etc etc. (I first used this in my fic *Home*, but it's the same worldbuilding of every fic in my series *to you I gift the end of things*.)

Sky is another one of Technoblade's stream chat moderators, the same as Jabber.

I’m here in search of your glory

Chapter Summary

Phil's been in his head so much that he forgets other people are scheming, too.

The next few weeks pass by in relative quiet.

Techno demands reparations from the Corvarian Empire for coming into their home and trying to kill them all for something that isn’t even part of the world. Phil hovers behind Techno’s shoulder for that one, wings flared, face impassive, his own weapon in hand.

They offer up diamonds and emeralds and apologies.

“We really *are* sorry,” Kara Corvus says, and there’s a tension in her shoulders that makes Phil think she’s telling the truth.

But *sorry* doesn’t cover the fact that they’d rigged up their base with explosives, put lives at risk, made Techno show his hand. Phil nicks a few extra things from the Corvarian Empire’s stash before he goes—emerald blocks here, a nether star or two there. Not because the reparations aren’t enough—no, there’s enough that it cements the Antarctic Empire’s place on the economic front, for now—but because he’s feeling petty.

People—random people, ones that Jabber and Sky don’t know, let alone Techno—venture into the arctic wastes to try and join them, after that negotiation. Some of them want to join in on the action; others think that taking their chances in Antarctica will ensure them a quieter life.

The Antarctic Empire doesn’t reject any of them, but it does make Techno press his lips together with something like concern.

“We’re gonna have a food shortage issue soon,” he tells Phil, in the dark of the night when it’s just the two of them poring over maps again. It’s a familiar feeling from those first days on a faction server, but instead of fighting in another man’s war, they’re attempting to establish an entire community here. It’s new, and exciting, and nothing that Phil’s ever done before.

It makes the breath catch in his throat for a few different reasons, and only one is because Techno’s right.

“The cows I brought aren’t behaving,” Phil admits, with only a little bit of regret. He hadn’t needed to revive any of them, but for some reason, they still aren’t breeding. “I don’t know if it’s because of the stronghold, or the cold, or something I’m not thinking of.”

Techno hums, thoughtful. “You know,” he says, tone careful, “there’s good land to the east of us.”

It’s part of the icy southern continent. They’ve stuck near the stronghold for the most part—why build their own walls when there is stone embedded in the side of the mountain?—but it’s a thought.

Phil traces the path from the stronghold to a good build site. It’s still on the continent, without any large rivers or fjords that’ll affect any railroads that they build. The ice spires aren’t too tall or the valleys too treacherous that they can’t travel by plane in an emergency.

“Maybe,” Techno says, when Phil taps a finger to show him. He puts down a little marker—ah, the quartz ones, crafted by Jabber in their free time. Phil’s looking forward to taking that to the center spire and seeing how high a price he can haggle to sell to the mainlanders. “Close enough to Australia that we can grab resources from there.”

Not too close that it won’t still take them a good rowing across the sea—or a little bit of navigation on planes, where the horizon and lack of landmarks will turn them around if they’re not careful. Phil marks down two other spots that might work, just in case.

“Are you gonna check ‘em yourself?” Techno asks, when Phil straightens from the maps again. There’s something on his face that he doesn’t understand.

Techno’s been content to stay with the stronghold—still wary of the Corvarian Empire, Phil knows, and that reminds him, he needs to go and teach them a proper lesson instead of these small hassling tricks he’s pulled on them—but his wings are still fluttering on his back.

“Yeah.” Phil watches his σύναστρο’s hands, his stance. He’s—not restless, Phil knows how to recognize that in the mirror. He’s thoughtful.

“Okay,” Techno says, and he’s looking away again. His eyes are unreadable under the mask that he’s yet to take off around Phil again. “When you’re there, take some notes on how feasible it’d be to put up launch pads, would you?”

Phil blinks slowly. “Launch pads for planes or railroads?”

“…both.”

Well, that’s easy enough to do. A bit of flat land, a bit of open horizon, a good spot for a dead straight-away across the sea to the mainland. Phil shuffles his plans for world domination around a little, to take advantage of the eastern shore. “You got it, mate. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Techno seems to have forgotten the elephant in the room. Phil has not. If he mentions his mistake then Techno will remember that Phil had given him a feather and then *taken it back*, like he’d regretted it, like Techno is no longer precious to him—and—to confront it is scary. Better to lay in his own guilt and misery and stew.

But things don't change. Phil takes pictures and brings back scouting information of which of their three potential valleys are best for city building, and Techno takes the information to their builders and redstone engineers with glee. Phil watches the back and forth and feels the excited energy to the air, and thinks: ah.

He takes some of the animals with them when a handful of the Empire's people trudge out to the east to lay their foundations. They're going to have to build the city from the ground up, but at least one wall will be facing an icy mountain—like the stronghold, Jabber points out, but there's excitement in their voice too.

They have grand visions of what kind of city they'll build. Some of them favor quartz walls that will blend into the mountains, a literal city made of ice; others want something more stark, utilitarian, a piece of the stronghold transplanted.

"What do you think?" Techno asks, when they're poring over architectural plans together.

Phil slots a data crystal into his communicator and sets the holo spinning. "I was thinking something like this."

Techno does a double take. Phil swallows, hard, and waits for the commentary.

None comes. Techno just steps forward, peering closely at the designs. "I see," he says, and his voice is unreadable, deadpan again.

"I like the high arches," Phil admits. He should probably explain. He pulls open the notes that had come with it: chiseled stone, blackstone, dark oak, spruce. The nerves almost overtake him; he tamps down on the urge to ramble with great prejudice. Through it, he manages: "And I think it will look nice, if a little obvious that it's there."

"We *want* it to be obvious," Techno snorts, but he's gentle with the holo as he rotates the model around. "…who gave it to you?"

"I'm not actually sure." Plancke and Bembo had been the one to hand him the plans, but he knows that the Hypixel building team is bigger than just the two of them. There's more than two sets of handwriting in the written notes, more than two typing styles in the reports. They have been generous. They have been *kind*.

Techno stares at the holo, obviously thinking. Phil shuffles on his feet.

Eventually he says, voice tight: "I like the castle."

"Then we'll build the castle." It'd been one of the ones that Phil had been eyeing, and it'd certainly fit Techno's brand. Phil's going to have to convince the others onto the project, but that's easy, that's fine. The materials will be straightforward. It's the time and labor that will be the big problem, but laying foundations is meditative and so is raising walls. "An exact replica, do you think, or should we change it up a little?"

"Let's add a few things." Techno drifts his fingers through the ceiling of the castle's plans, pointing out a few spots. "Places to hide. Maybe another spot," he adds, side-eyeing Phil

from beneath the mask, “for a stash. Like the bunker.”

Phil doesn’t drop the communicator, but it’s a near thing. Techno huffs at him, clearly amused.

“Everyone knows about it, anyway,” he adds, as though it changes anything about something of Techno that is so inherent to the way he approaches problems. He schemes, he plots, he plans, and he prepares. But also as though it means nothing, to recruit Phil in building this new one, where presumably he’d built the bunker in the citadel by himself. “And I want your opinion on what I put in there.”

Oh.

Phil coughs, and clears his throat. He hums a little, tries to string his thoughts together into something coherent, and here where it is warm and there is a mug of milk at Techno’s elbow and their wingtips are brushing and even if Techno hasn’t taken off his mask his eyes are still soft beneath it—

He plucks up his meager courage and asks, “Why not have more than one cache in the walls?”

It takes them a little while, but they build their city.

People are excited about it; there’s a shimmer to the air, as they flit back and forth with stacks of stone and wood and prismarine. Here on the eastern border of their land, the cows actually breed and the chickens lay more eggs. The food shortage issue dissolves as though it had never been, and takes the tension in Techno’s shoulders with it.

Quietly, Phil puts away his stash of emeralds—enough to buy the whole of the Empire six months’s worth of food—away, for another shortage. Just in case.

They lay redstone and caches and anchor the other side of their homing coins into the heart of the city. They raise roofs and build in defense mechanisms, and lay tunnels that Phil would expect in a desert city, not an ice-locked winter one.

In the middle of it, Phil finds moments to slip away and breathe. It’s different having so many people around; easier with Techno, but still different. A little hard.

Hard to ignore the whispers, too. Everyone’s friends here, but being in a stronghold in a world that’s cut off from the End is—different. Phil hasn’t felt this antsy in years, and it doesn’t even make *sense*. He’s old, he knows self-discipline, he can keep himself reined in.

Except a few weeks into the move of half the Empire to the eastern city, Phil discovers that he can call down thunder and lightning.

Or rather, it’s more accurate to say that *everyone* can call down thunder and lightning—for, of course, the right price. In all honesty, it’s pretty expensive. Every time he wants to twist a bolt of heaven’s wrath between his fingers to intimidate people and terrify them a little bit, he

needs to offer up the appropriate number of diamonds to the void. The universe opens a little dragon maw every time, hungry for resources, for sacrifice, for blood.

But diamonds are cheap to Phil—it is, at the end of the day, just a means to an end—and he gives it plenty of blood over the next few days.

Techno sees him for only some of it. It's not because Phil keeps it from him, of course—but —

Well. Phil doesn't go out of his way to make sure that Techno sees how bloodthirsty the strikes make him, either. His friend has plenty of problems on his hands, caught knee-deep in the minutiae that is building an Empire from the ground up, and he doesn't need more.

No, Phil just listens to Techno's quiet musings on what faction is moving on what natural resource, hears his concerns about the unofficial arms race that people have locked themselves into, and quietly slips away at the end of the meeting.

It doesn't help, probably, that the ball of fire and light and *intent* feels as comfortable in his hand as Benihime. There's something to be said for the ease with which the bolt of light comes when he calls—the hint of a smile in the dragon's maw, the playful nip on his fingers as the void snaps closed—but Phil carefully doesn't think about it.

It's the nature of the universe. If he thinks about it, it makes it real.

Either way, when he's done playing around with seeing how much damage he can wreak, he brings down the first round of serious strikes on the Corvarian Empire. He conceals himself, wings and all, when he does so—but he doesn't hide the sword. After all, he has to give them at least *something* to gossip about.

In the middle of one of his sabotage runs, Phil helps himself to some loot. The admin's spire only cares about true rule breakage, the kind that destabilizes respawn magic and the world's orbit among the universal spheres, and that leaves a lot of leeway for someone who is old enough to know all the tricks. Especially on a planet that's made to be *conquered*.

Fit outright laughs at him when they find each other raiding the same trade center on the northeastern side of the planet.

"Fancy seeing you here," he snickers, even as he flicks crystals between his fingers like someone else would perform coin tricks. Those are a little more expensive than harrier strikes —Phil's *checked*, just in case, and has his own tiny stash of them ready to go for a more apocalyptic final measure—but he does switch them out for his actual sword and shield when Phil gives him a meaningful look. "I thought you were the richest man on the planet, Philza?"

Technically he is. "Can never have too many diamonds," Phil says instead, and strikes down an angered Player without even thinking about it. His wings are folded, he's not using those harrier strikes that have made him infamous—even if by a moniker, since he's not dumb enough to get *caught*—it's fine. Everything is fine.

Fit still gives him a look when he switches to letting Players burn to death instead of striking them down with his own two hands.

Phil ignores him. It's a safety precaution; it's common sense. The reasoning behind wanting to keep his own name on the downlow is twofold, and Fit already knows half of it.

"Good to see you back in action," Fit says as they finish cleaning house, his tone as mild as milk.

Phil knows what this looks like. "Never got out."

"Oh?"

They reach the chests at the center of the camp at the same time. Phil goes for the ones on the wall, while Fit takes his chances with the ones set into the floor.

He clicks his tongue in annoyance when he finds only emeralds; Phil smiles into the stack of diamonds that he slips into his bag.

"I heard that there was somebody going around and harrier striking everything."

He pauses. There is nothing here of worth. If he needs to, he can throw everything at Fit and run—but, of course, he knows Fit and Fit knows him. The guy won't take the easy way out if there's a point to be made.

"Does he know you're doing this, Philza?"

"No." And it *is* Philza who straightens up, Benihime in hand. Fit isn't an idiot; he's leaning against the doorway now, half the room away, even though he knows it'll only give him a brief head start.

There's a downward twist to his lips. "You didn't tell him?"

"He knows I'm a good fighter." It's kind of hard to conceal that. "He doesn't know what I've been prepping, no."

And considering that Phil's been talking his and Jordan's ears off whenever he could get away with it, Fit is remarkably understanding when he says, "Maybe you should."

Philza doesn't blink.

"Think about it, bud. An *entire planet*? That's kind of a big gift to be dropping on someone."

"It's no less than he deserves." Besides. That's not even the *point*, and Fit knows it. Philza doesn't know why he's doing the run-around.

And, yeah. There it is. A look of understanding passes over Fit's face as he sighs. "Let alone someone who's been undergoing deification."

Blood for the blood god, and all that. "You know what I'm trying to do."

“Speed it up.” Fit clicks his tongue. “Have you talked to Jordan about that yet?”

“…no.” And it’s a cowardly move, he knows it, Phil *knows it*, he needs to check with their resident expert on godly shenanigans and the sense of humor of a universe that loves them, but—

Asking Jordan would make it real. Right here, right now, Phil operates in a comfortable state of neither confirmation nor denial. He can pretend that everything is fine. He can pretend that his σύναστρο is not in danger of being gifted something that is too painful for him to hold.

He can pretend, but judging from the expression on Fit’s face, he has no intention of letting him.

“Well,” Fit says, and sighs. Cracks his neck. “I’m under directions from Jordan to bring you to him whenever I ran into you next.”

Phil stares. This isn’t *uncommon* between them, but for Jordan to so blatantly ask Fit and meddle like this instead of waiting for Phil to come to him on his own time—

“He’s cheating.”

“He’s cheating,” Fit confirms, and then he lunges forward, all quick lethal grace.

Phil doesn’t actually want to hurt Fit. The reverse isn’t true. Fit ends up dragging him to the plane by the scruff of the neck and tossing him in none too gently.

He wonders what Techno sees, when he looks at the world map. Phil’s no stranger to these parts, even before, and he had left in the middle of the night, and now he’s headed for a—to him—stranger’s country.

He hesitates and dithers before he bites the bullet. There’s a message on his communicator when he checks, somewhere in the flight crammed into the plane with Fit: *What do you think about Africa?*

It’s pretty warm, Phil sends back. His heart is in his throat. He clutches at his communicator until he’s lost sensation in his fingers.

The three little dots on his screen turn into actual words: *Let me know when you’re back. Got a plan to run by you.*

“Texting your bestie?” Fit asks when he notices. There’s more than a little teasing to his voice as he looks over.

Phil plants a foot in his face for the trouble.

They’ve talked about pranks, and sabotage, and mischief on this server before—but nothing like this. Nothing as serious as Philza Minecraft needing advice. But of course, the two of

them take one look at his nervousness and choose to break the tension in the most ridiculous way possible.

“You let *Fit* meet him,” Jordan asks, incredulity in every atom of him, “and not *me*?”

“Technically, you met him in that elimination round.” Phil still cherishes that memory, just because Jordan had underestimated them and then gotten shanked for it. “Or did you want another go, Mr. ‘Couldn’t Even Make It to Finals’?”

“He’s your σύναστρο.” Jordan laughs, but it’s not unkind. There is, after all, a reason he’s of Mianite. “He’s supposed to be evenly matched with you.”

There he goes, using words again. Phil stares. “I know he is—but how did you? That first time?”

“Oh, you know.” Jordan’s eyes shade towards amethyst; and yet the smile he gives is all his own. “I had a feeling about it.”

“A *feeling*, hm?” Fit leans in. “Is that the word we use nowadays for a *well-educated guess*?”

Phil manages to keep a straight face for only a handful more moments before he breaks. Jordan follows suit soon after.

“Yeah, yeah,” Fit grumbles from their third side, but he’s smiling too. “I thought this was going to be a very serious intervention, Jordan?”

“I’m trying!” Jordan wheezes, and for a few moments he’s giggling enough to sound young again. Phil stares, because that’s new. “I’m trying! It’s just—it’s Phil!”

“Yeah, and?”

“This is ridiculous, is all I’m saying.” Jordan wipes away a tear. “*Oh*, I never thought the day would come.”

Phil kicks Jordan in the shin. It doesn’t even make the guy stumble, of course, but it does make Phil feel better. “Mate, what’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Phil.” Fit shakes his head. “You’re as picky as hell with the company you keep, and then you—”

Oh, god. He starts counting off on his fingers. Phil stares.

“You finished off a war with him, then showed up at an invite-only competition with him, and now you’re co-leaders of his faction.” Fit smiles, and it’s more than a little toothy. “I’m just sayin’, I’m getting jealous here, man.”

Jealous?

Fit doesn’t elaborate. Phil sighs, though, and leans some of his weight into his friend’s side. He doesn’t move away, not even when Phil can feel the shift of his weight and prepares for

the sudden loss of it himself.

“I’m sorry about the dramatics,” Jordan laughs, but he’s sobering up quickly. He always had been good at that. “But I just wanted to say, you know, that I wanted you to be careful with your friend.”

Well. That’s a whiplash if Phil’s ever seen one. But Fit is serious, and so is Jordan, now, and there is the uncanny feeling of someone else looking in on the three of them.

Phil hasn’t gotten this far without figuring out a few tricks. He throws open his wings and engulfs them all in the feathers; Jordan reaches out, and his scythe falls into his hand. He taps the end of it against the floor, and the strike chimes in their ears.

Fit, of course, just glares at the ceiling until the feeling goes away.

“You see?” Jordan says after, like that answers anything. He’s smiling that smug smile of his.

Phil folds his wings away and pokes Jordan in the side. Fit steps on his foot, hands clasped behind his back, devil-may-care smirk on his face.

“*Ow*,” Jordan adds, and then: “Fine. I’ll elaborate. Get *off* my foot, Fit, how heavy are you now?!”

“Never ask a man how many weapons he’s carrying,” Fit replies serenely. He does get off Jordan’s foot, though.

Jordan snorts and shakes his head, shoves Fit a little for the trouble. “You see what I mean?” He glances back up at the ceiling, and his eyes are glowing. “It’s—kind of a miracle, Phil, that you found someone like him.”

They pause. Jordan looks at his wings, purposefully; Fit raises eyebrows at the sword sheathed by his side. “He’s unique,” Phil says when he’s found his voice.

He hadn’t realized that’d been what it was, but now that he thinks about it, it’s true. First the unnerving familiarity of the harrier strikes in his hand; now this. Oh stars. Is he running out of time or is he just late? Is it because of the bleedover? He doesn’t know how to tell anymore.

“He certainly is that,” Jordan allows. He rocks his scythe back and forth, the way he does when he’s thinking. “And you said that you wanted to take over the world?”

He doesn’t sound offended, or reserved or measured, the way he does when he’s preparing to go against somebody. Phil still resettles his own weight on his feet before he nods.

“So half the reason that I can see,” Fit says, “is because you want to—what. Give the guy a birthday present?”

“Kind of,” Phil lies, and leaves out the part where Techno’s birthday isn’t for another year.

“It’ll be a shitty present if you ask me.” Fit snorts and shakes his head. “Conquering is one thing, but *ruling* is another. And then you have to *keep* them all under your rule—man, Phil, are you ready for that?”

“I’ll figure it out,” Phil tells one of the informal faction leaders of an anarchy server. “You know the other half.” He’s poured the fears in his heart out to them, about that other half.

“It will definitely help,” Jordan admits. The reassurance drains some tension that Phil hadn’t even realized he’d been carrying, even if Fit had ambushed and dragged him here. “Deification in a controlled fashion is better than none at all. It’d started in Hypixel, you’d said?”

“Yes.” Phil gives in and slumps over, scrubs his hands over his eyes. “And I don’t have a lot of time to do it in.”

“You don’t.” Jordan taps the end of his scythe against the floor again, once, twice. The strikes ring in their ears, all clear tones of the bubbling brooks. “But you do.”

Fit points an accusing finger. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“No,” Phil interrupts, “it does.” He wishes it didn’t. “Jordan’s saying that it’s too late to stop the process, but it’s not too late to make it—painless.”

“How so?” Fit leans in. “From what you’ve told me, Jordan’s a champion and yours was just —”

Different. And Fit is, of course, still some uncertain shade of mortal. Phil swallows hard and wishes he could fiddle with Benihime, but that would be toeing the line where they’re already under scrutiny.

“That’s why you’re taking over the world, aren’t you,” Jordan says into the silence. He is nonjudgmental, even-keeled, impartial. There’s no amethyst on him or in his eyes; it’s all him. “Or, well. Part of the reason. As long as his name’s the one that’s spread, then you can control the rate, as much as things like this are controllable.”

“I really *am* sorry,” Phil confesses.

“And I *still* think you’re being an idiot.” Fit ribs him none-too-gently. “But hey. One of us has to be the idiot, to make the others look good. I suppose it’s you this time around.”

“One last warning,” Jordan tells him before he goes. “I’m not kidding when I said I had a *feeling* about him.”

Jordan emphasizes the word like it’s supposed to mean something. Phil feels eyes on the back of his neck, attention weighing on his shoulders like a mantle, a blanket, a burden to bear.

“A good feeling?” he asks, because Jordan is an old friend but something in him recognizes Techno, and this is the quickest he’s ever recognized like in like.

“The best,” Jordan says. There’s pain in the corner of his mouth as he smiles. “Just—be careful, okay? And let me know if you want to ally our nations together.”

Phil stills. “I thought you were allied with the Corvarian Empire.”

“They’re friendly neighbors,” Jordan allows, but there’s that curl to his smirk, the one that Phil hasn’t seen often since Jordan became a champion. “But I figured you wouldn’t be too busted up if I wanted their land for my own.”

Phil’s waved right over to the planning room as soon as he gets home.

People are bustling about, energetic, excited. More so than when he’d left. He watches Jabber rush away with armfuls of netherite ingots, Sky following after with their own stack of weapons to enchant.

“What’s happening?” he asks. Techno doesn’t even look up from his maps, doesn’t double check who’s approaching.

As tired as he is, it takes Phil a moment to notice: Techno’s wings are folded away, dismissed and gone.

“There you are, Phil.” Techno points out their eastern city to him, then the stronghold, then follows the line up to Africa. “How doable is a cross-sea campaign?”

Phil blinks. “If we can build a bridge beforehand, pretty doable. What’s up, mate?”

Techno takes a moment more over the maps, putting down markers, sketching over with charcoal. When he looks up, his eyes are bright behind the mask. “When they were draftin’ their rules, Phil, they left out a critical factor.”

Phil knows that voice. He straightens, even though he’s standing, and feels the hairs rise on the back of his neck. “What do you mean?”

The grin that Techno gives him is predatory. “The admins missed a spot.”

Techno explains the exploit to him. They’re going to need to swallow up some land, tear down a few countries, but if they can do it—and do it right—then after a certain point the planet itself will recognize them as owning more than 51%, and declare them the ruling faction.

It’s supposed to be based on landmass. But, Techno explains, the planet recognizes *any* surface area—and therein lies the problem. The magic that runs multi-Player server worlds is tricky, and a glitch like this could permanently ban people in them from using items. This could fuck over their beds, their *respawn.*

It’s dangerous. And Techno wants to prove a point.

“How do we prove the point?” Phil asks, heart in his throat.

“We’re gonna hafta take over the world to do that.”

He dreams that night. He doesn’t often, but lying in bed in anticipation, stewing in worry, he —slips up.

The sky is dark. The stars are all in the water, some floating above, some half-sunk under the surface. The air is dead still, charged in the moment before the storm, and Phil tilts his head back to stare into the Eye that’s hovering in the void.

Aren’t you curious? the universe asks, and Phil says, no. I am not.

The surface of the Well ripples. The stars sink back beneath the brackish water. Planets retreat and take their proper places again.

Phil breathes, and snaps out his wings, and takes control of his dream.

What do you do when your friend’s asked for the thing you were supposed to give him as an apology?

Go the fuck to sleep, Fit texts back. Jordan, the bastard, just sends a smiley face.

But Techno sits with him, peppermint tea and milk and honey prepared like he’d known that Phil would wake up with a nightmare, and he’s too grateful for the quiet and peace to question how he’d known.

in the gradient wake of the sun

Chapter Summary

It's a beautiful day on the server, and today they will cause problems on purpose.

Chapter Notes

This is fresh off the press. Apologies for any typos; I'll catch them in the morning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Techno had mentioned a ‘cross-sea campaign,’ it had not occurred to Phil, for some reason, that he’d also meant warfare on the open seas.

“It’s only practical,” Techno says, but there’s too much laughter in his voice for the dry tone he’s going for. “Planes can get shot down real easy, and what we really want is to conquer half the planet—y’know, also includin’ the waters, and what easier way to do that than a boat that’s also a mobile base of operations?”

“Techno,” Phil says, choking down his own laughter. “Techno, you made a *moving, floating tank*.”

“Technically, it’s called a turtle boat.”

“Technically, I don’t think turtles go to *war*, mate.”

“Well they do now!”

The boat’s only resemblance to the turtle is the fact that it has the iron shell. The sails, and the roaring dragon of a figurehead, and the *canons* that are embedded into the sides and dragon’s maw are all for war, not the peaceful creatures that Phil recognizes.

“Where did you even *get* the idea, mate?”

“History, of course.” Techno snorts, but his mouth is curving up in the shadow of his mask. “Tried and true. It’s pretty costly in iron, but we’ve got plenty of those.”

They do. And the Empire’s land is surrounded by water; not only does the eastern city have good launch pads for their railways and their planes, but it’s also not that far of a distance to the sea. It is completely possible for them to rule the ocean as well as the sky.

And even when the bridge from Antarctica to Australia is finished, the ships will save them time when they head even further north.

“They’re not gonna know what hits them,” Phil wheezes out. “Mate. We’re gonna *steamroll* them.”

“Land, sea, and sky.” Techno bounces on the balls of his feet. “Did you see Jabber’s sample of our crest yet?”

“What? They’ve *finished*?”

“Yeah.” The eyes behind the mask—the ones that Techno lets Phil see—are glittering. Phil inhales, and there’s something bright and sharp on the back of his tongue. Not quite copper yet, but close.

“Then all we gotta do is plant that shit all over the world.”

“An easy enough task, really. Child’s play. Anybody could do it. …think we’ll have it done before first harvest?”

“If it takes us that long, Techno, I’m gonna—you know, I don’t know what I’m gonna do. Eat my hat, maybe?”

“Not your *hat*,” Techno laughs, but the shoulder-bump he gives Phil is fond. “There’s no nutritional value or saturation in that.”

“I dunno, mate, have you tried it? You never know.”

Phil sits down on a rock on the peak of his mountain ranges. It’s always cold up there, whether it’s in the middle of summer or not. The silence is only broken by the howling of the wind, and the thermals he can reach when he jumps soar high above his world, and if he times it right then it’s almost like he can glide straight through the twilight and into the star-studded horizon.

Aren’t you dying to know?

“No,” Phil replies. “I’m really *not*, thanks. I could do without knowing.”

The winds die down. The sky turns a violent orange. The air starts to warm, even though that’s impossible—in anywhere, that is, except for a dream.

He’s dreaming again.

“I already *said* no,” he adds, in case he hadn’t been heard the first time. He gets to his feet slowly, flexes his wings as he does so, takes the few steps forward until he’s standing at the ledge. “Why are you asking?”

But even as he asks, he knows why they’re pushing. Gravity is a universal constant. The stars live for a very long time, and their memories are equally as slow to fade. There’s no Well all

the way up here, but Phil can still see the dark waters and the scales that flash beneath the surface, catching moonlight.

“Don’t ask me again,” Phil says, and because he’s not an idiot he adds: “At least not until we’re done here. You can be patient enough for that, right?”

There’s lots of eager hands building boats over the next few days. Phil and Techno have hoards of resources on their own, and over time they end up strip mining the hell out of the earth beneath the ice.

There’s actually a lot of interesting things down there. It’s no volcano, to be sure, but they find plenty of iron and coal and redstone to have more than enough canons to outfit the fleet.

And it is a fleet, in the end. Five ships strong, which wouldn’t be a lot in terms of boats but in terms of war ships, on a planet that is majority aerial or land-based one-on-one combat?

No one is prepared for the first raiding party. Phil oversees it from the skies as Memph leads the charge. They’re all old guard, this first raid; only people who’ve joined them that first week, when the Antarctic Empire hadn’t retaliated against the Corvarians and drawn the attention of the planet’s factions.

They cut down the small budding faction of some no-name Player with ease. They’re not here for food, or valuables, or armors or weapons; just death.

Phil drinks in the sight of it, and it is sweet.

“Why are you doing this?” one of the unfortunate cries. Their eyes are wide. Their face is devastated. Their axe and shield slip out of their hands, crashing into the soil, and they don’t even seem to notice.

“Because we can,” Phil snickers, watching Sky come to a stop behind them. The rest of this tiny base is burning behind them, and they all know there’s nothing this faction can do to stop it. “Because you had the misfortune of being the first coastal faction on our way to world domination.”

“What?”

“Surrender and be absorbed into the Antarctic Empire.” Phil’s been hovering in the air, sword in hand, but he summons a harrier strike now. It leaps to his hand with ease, with eagerness, a well-loved companion who is aching for blood. “Or don’t, it’s more fun that way.”

“Philza,” Sky sighs, and makes the poor unnamed soul jump a foot into the air in surprise. “The harrier strike is just overkill. We can kill them all and burn their fields, and it’d be the same thing.”

They have a point. Still: “It’s more fun with strikes!”

“Philza,” Sky says again, but Phil recognizes the undertone to their voice; they’re trying not to laugh now. It makes him smile. “We’re here to *conquer*, remember?”

“Conquer?” their victim squeaks.

Phil flaps his wings, once, twice, before he makes up his mind. He closes his hand to dismiss the harrier strike, dismisses his sword, and makes a divebomb straight for the kid.

The kid, of course, tries to run—and does so straight into Sky’s sword. Phil veers away as soon as they’re fracturing into respawn light, coming in for a gentler landing.

“I feel like I should tell Techno on you,” Sky grumbles when Phil comes back close enough. “All we gotta do is burn their flag and plant ours, isn’t it?”

Well, yes. But Phil’s blood is coursing through his veins, and he is filled with light and blood and the high of a good kill, and Benihime is singing in his hand.

But he’s not far gone enough that he can’t rein himself in. He isn’t supposed to be the angel of death here, he reminds himself, no matter how fun it is to smite things. They are here for one reason. This half of the raiding party needs him, and after, there is a stronghold and a city and a σύναστρο who is waiting for him.

He still watches Sky plant the flag with wide eyes and a swiftly beating heart. Against the smoke and the flames, the blue of the Antarctic Empire looks like a distant quasar: bright and inevitable.

The ivory chrysanthemum, flying boldly in the center, untarnished by blood and almost glowing in the firelight, is just the cherry on top.

Fit catches up with them somewhere around the time that Techno commences their raids on the western hemisphere, and according to rumor, allies himself with the Antarctic Empire with a bang.

“Phil, you old dog!” he yells over the communicator, hovering over Techno’s shoulder. “How’s the conquering going over there?”

“Well enough,” Phil says. Fit looks good—no tarnish on his armor, no blood of his own that he can see. Techno, though, still has ash caked in his hair and streaking the gold of his crown. “Techno, mate, you’re fresh off the field, aren’t you? We can postpone the meeting until later.”

“Nah,” Techno grunts, leaning away from Fit’s unsubtle prodding. “Let’s get this done and over with so the scouts can go to bed.”

Phil watches Techno as he begins the meeting, drawing up reports from scouts, listening to check ins from the other raiding parties. Fit catches Phil’s eye over Techno’s shoulder and tips his chin down.

He checks his communicator. There is, of course, a silent text message from Fit: *Now I see why you told me to go with him*.

The plan had called for Phil to take half of their people and alliance on a route through the western seas, while Techno had taken Fit and the other half through the east. It's a neat plan, and a pincer movement whose participants make a victory inevitable, but it had sent Phil away from Techno's side.

And he knows that Techno is capable. He knows that Techno's more than earned his titles, multiple times over. But Phil is Philza, a survivalist, whose home is a Hardcore world, and if he can ensure his friend's safety, he'll do it even if it's overkill.

How is he doing?

Stressed. Fit's brow furrows as he texts, glancing up at Techno every so often. He's fine, though, Phil recognizes that glint in Techno's eye, the wide gestures as he points out markers on the maps: he's knee-deep in planning. He won't surface for a little while yet. *But damn, the kid is good*.

Phil flutters his wings and doesn't realize he's doing so until his feathers catch on his cloak. *I told you.*

I know, but I only ever saw him in duels, remember?

"How is the western warfront goin', Phil?"

Phil looks up from his keyboard. Sky snickers at him, but they don't out him, even as Phil scrambles through the holo settings to bring up their own campaign diagrams. "Going pretty well. We haven't run into major resistance yet, but we're about to skate by Jordan's—well. Kingdom of Jordan."

There are smiles all around. Phil would feel bad about the jibe on Jordan's behalf, but, well—it really *had* been too convenient, that the admin's maps had already declared that area as his friend's by sheer virtue of names.

"We're at about the same latitude, then." Techno sketches out a point on his map, and throws it up onto the shared holo screen. "Fit, that's your country, right?"

"Yup, that's Florida."

"And we've been plantin' flags on islands to anchor the claim on our way north."

It's not an easy thing, taking over a planet, but with a crew like this—with an army that might be small but consists of some of the most dangerous, well-prepared, and experienced warriors currently on planet—they make it look easy.

"Did you want to bring Jordan in on this?"

"Captain Sparklez?" Techno looks up from the screen, where he'd been discussing something with Fit. "What, you know him?"

Fit has a very mysterious coughing fit behind Techno. Memph, the poor soul, offers him water that he refuses.

Phil studiously ignores the incredulous glare that Fit sends him and says instead, “I bet I can convince him to join us.”

“Hey Phil. Did you know that Technoblade is eating souls?”

Phil blinks. He’s still reeling from how quickly Jordan had picked up his call; he’s not prepared for the rapid-fire question.

Also, “How do you know that? He’s way out east right now, he’s nowhere near your country.”

“Perks,” Jordan replies lightly, and ah. That makes sense. “But Phil. *Did you know*?”

“Know what?”

They’re tiptoeing around the subject. Phil knows it, and Jordan knows it. Jordan still does him the favor of not sounding neutral when he repeats: “Technoblade is eating souls. Did you know that?”

“I did not,” Phil says, because he honestly hadn’t. “*Souls*? I thought they weren’t your prerogative?”

“Milady is of justice, she’s tangential to souls.”

“This isn’t Mianite, though.”

“And yet we’re still close enough to the Well that you’re trigger-happy, your point?”

Philza blinks, slowly. The effect is lost when his target is leagues away and through a communicator, but he rather thinks the point gets across well enough, if Jordan’s wince is any indication.

“Don’t think that I’m not going to grill you about that, too,” Jordan says, but he runs his hand over his face. “Anyway. Phil, I can *feel* it.”

If Jordan can feel it—“We haven’t gotten a cease and desist, though?”

“Because no one’s permanently died yet, thank *Ianite*.” Jordan peeks up from behind his hand. “You know what I’ll have to do if he steps over that line, Phil.”

“No.” The answer comes immediately, guttural, from something deep in his soul. Philza flares his wings and mantles them, and looms over the camera of the communicator in lieu of an actual person to do it to. “You have no right.”

“As Champion—”

“As Angel,” Philza counters.

Jordan stares. When Philza doesn’t say anything else, he slowly raises his eyebrows.

And then he realizes. Aw, *shit*. Phil closes his eyes, resigned.

“You’d go that far?”

“I’m going to,” Phil tells the darkness behind his eyelids, “if you overstep, Jordan.”

There’s silence for a moment. Then: “For him?”

“Yes.”

“…you feel it, don’t you, though?”

And that’s an echo in Jordan’s voice. Philza opens his eyes, just to confirm, but there it is. Amethyst eyes.

“You would have to be blind and deaf to not,” Jordan continues, his goddess’s words in his mouth that sets Philza’s ears ringing. “You are playing with fire. This will end in heartache.”

Philza thinks about dreaming and Wells and high mountaintops where he’d made a demand and the universe had granted his request. “But it might not.”

“Perhaps not,” Ianite confirms, and Philza had guessed, had made a *well-educated assumption*, but the confirmation still loosens some tense knot in his chest that he hadn’t realized existed. “May luck be with you, χρυσωπός.”

And then Jordan sighs, and the amethyst leaves him, and Philza folds his wings away until they’re just two old men, staring at each other over a communicator again.

Phil breaks first and buries his face in his hands. “Jordan, I thought you said it was a *good* feeling?”

“And it *is*,” Jordan confirms, but he’s running his hands through his hair, the way he does when he’s especially frustrated. “Just, you know. A gift horse in the mouth, be careful what you wish for, that sort of deal.”

That’s a mashing of two completely different sayings, but Phil understands. It’s a sentiment that happens often when grace comes from the universe instead of another mortal. Something that is meant in good faith, always, but the gift is heavy and the price is steep.

“Do you want to help me out, then?”

“What?”

Phil lifts his face from his hands and gives Jordan a tired grin, the best he can muster up right now. “That’s what I called you for in the first place. We’re halfway through world domination. If you’re done playing with the Corvarians, you should come join us.”

“I thought you didn’t need me yet?”

“Nah, and we still shouldn’t, but don’t you want to see the looks on their faces when they realize just what happened?”

“Now that *is* a tempting offer…”

“You know a lot of people are going to declare war against you.”

“Let them try,” Phil says, and grins with all his teeth. “Let them come, if they have the courage.”

The poor kid blanches. Phil inhales, tastes the fear on the back of his tongue, and is surprised to find it cinnamon-like.

It doesn’t matter, anyway. It’s been a few weeks now, and they’re almost at the end game. Fields and towns are burning behind them, but the ones that were stubborn are outnumbered by the ones that took up the chrysanthemum flag of the Empire without too much of a fight. The admins have had plenty of time to stop them.

This silence is uncharacteristic. Maybe Phil should look into that.

“And you?” Sky asks the kid for him. They’re cocking out a hip, sword held easy in their hand. “Are you foolish enough to continue this? We’re really not asking for a lot, you know.”

The kid looks down. “Just our land and sovereignty.”

“It’s a faction world, kid.” Sky grins, and there’s a light in their eye that Phil recognizes from the mirror, from under Techno’s mask, from a championship field stained with blood. “But you should know—while we were here chatting, my squad’s taken the liberty of breaking your bedspawn. If you die here, you’ll start over with nothing at the world center.”

And under threat of losing their material wealth—which Phil really doesn’t understand, it’s all just time and effort that’s gone away; emeralds and diamonds only have enough meaning as you give it—the kid, like those before him, caves.

“Some guy named Arlus Finch wants an alliance.”

“Okay.” Phil tilts his head, trying to read Techno’s thoughts over holo. Usually Techno is ambivalent about requests for alliance, especially ones that are offered as an attempt to spare themselves some leeway in the Empire’s world conquest. But today, he seems—uneasy. “What’s up, mate?”

Techno shuffles on his feet, the way he does when he’s deep in thought. Phil settles in to wait. It’s late at night, and the two of them still have an agenda to go through, but staying up with him is no hardship at all.

Eventually Techno says: “We shouldn’t trust the guy.”

“What?” Phil leans in. Techno looks up, and there’s a twist to the line of his mouth like he’s bitten into something he doesn’t like the taste of. “I mean, if that’s what you think then that’s what we’ll do, but is it an impression that he gives off?”

“You could say that.” Techno smirks. “And, also, you could say that a little birdy told me of his crimes.”

But Techno looks away and tilts his head, and the hum of the universe lilts and dips in pitch, and Phil’s heard that song before. The favored son has much to gain, and equally as much to lose.

“What do the others think? Fit was with you when you met with Finch, right?”

Techno snorts. “Fit thinks the guy’s a mole, or somethin’. Y’know? A plant.”

Fit is always looking for the storm cloud in every silver lining. But then again, the Empire has been making swift progress in their plans for world domination. “Or he’s asking because he doesn’t want his country to get swallowed up.”

“Doesn’t mean we can’t use him. Any country we don’t have to conquer is a bunch of resources we can use to conquer someplace else.”

That’s true enough. Phil checks the map. “How useful would Finch’s land be to us?”

Techno waggles his hand in the air. “He’s in a pretty remote location. Might be a hassle when we go plant our flags, but he’s an island country. No help from any quarter unless they railroad or fly in.”

And by then, the warships will have already done their jobs. “Might as well let him try.”

“Mm?”

“Finch, I mean.” Phil leans a hip against the table and props up his chin, to better look at the holo. They’ll be done with their pincer movement in a few days, and then both halves of the army will meet up. In Phil’s opinion, that day can’t come too soon. “I think it’ll be fun to watch him try, if he’s really a plant.”

“Careful there, Phil,” Techno says, but that’s not his warning voice; there’s too much amusement in it for that. “You’re speakin’ like a real Emperor.”

I’ll only be one if you are too, Phil almost says, but manages to swallow *that* down in time.

His communicator rings. Phil picks up, because he’s expecting a call from Techno, and he can fly the plane and talk easily enough.

The voice on the phone startles him: “Philza?”

Ah. That’d serve Phil right, for not doing the research before he joined Techno here. But then again, he’d always known this, hadn’t he? He’d just ran away from confronting it like a

coward.

“Why are you doing this, Philza?”

“Don’t think you can fool me, mate,” Phil says, and steadies the plane before he can crash into the sea. “You know me. You know what I’m here for.”

“I understand *that* part. But out of all people, why Technoblade?”

Oh, it’s a golden opportunity if he’s ever seen one. Phil leans back in his seat, keeping one hand on the controls of the plane while he lounges with his communicator in the other. “Techno’s got a way with words,” he says. “If he wants to take over the world, then I’m gonna help him.”

“*Technoblade*?” the person on the other side of the call repeats, incredulity dripping from very syllable. “With *you* helping? Philza, you know that’s just unfair.”

“Hey, he was the one who brought me onto the server.” He’s passing over the northern seas now. To the left is Business Bay, or what’s left of it. Straight ahead is the north pole. “If you wanted me to stay out of it, you should have told me.”

Phil doesn’t quite manage to keep the harshness out of his tone. There’s silence on the communicator for a long moment.

“I was thinking about it this whole *world domination* thing,” Wilbur says after. “The other admins think it’s unfair. But you know, *I* think it’s fine.”

Phil isn’t too proud to admit it: he does a double take, even though there’s no one here to see it except for the few birds flying this high.

“And I know what you’re thinking! ‘Oh, Wilbur’s an admin now, but he won’t even try and keep the balance.’” Wilbur must lean into the microphone of the communicator, because his voice turns low and quiet: “But Philza—this is the way I wanted things to go.”

“One faction to rule them all?”

“No, no. World conquest, through blood or peace or war or negotiations. It’s a social experiment, see? If you set the older generation of Players loose in lands meant to be conquered—those people blessed by the universe, unlike the poor villagers who are stuck on their home server world—how would they react? Would they be quicker in taking over the world? More efficient? Or would they not bother with it at all, beyond a quick attempt at it, because there are more interesting things than fighting?”

And it’s not like Phil hadn’t *known* Wilbur’s mind ran like this. The kid always had been fascinated by what makes people tick. He’s young, too, young enough to make Phil’s teeth ache, and there comes a time in every Player’s life when they do stupid things just to see how it’ll crash and burn. Maybe later Phil can sit down with him, to try and untangle the mess that Wilbur’s made of the duties he’d taken on when he’d built a world and called himself an admin.

But right here, right now, Phil only cares about one thing. “So you’re not going to contest us taking over the world.”

“Nope!” Wilbur laughs, a handful of glass shattered over concrete, and the fondness is hard to hear. “But the other admins might. Watch your back, Philza Minecraft.”

Phil and Techno share battlefields only the once, towards the end.

And it’s—almost nostalgic, watching Techno’s back as he wages war. Phil keeps an eye in the sky, bags full of potions that he drops on unsuspecting enemies. Techno carves a path through enemy lines for their own side to take advantage of, and before long they’ve cracked through the alliance’s last stand into two halves, like split wood.

“Surrender or die,” Techno tells them, an ultimatum that they’ve been using for weeks now. His voice lilts and his crown is singing and he is backlit by the fire and the warships, and it’s the most beautiful thing that Philza’s seen in years. Even better than the blood-streaked and vibrant champion that he’d followed in the wake of, killing well-known Players in a tournament broadcast throughout the universe.

“Snap out of it,” Fit tells him when he finds Philza later. He’s narrowed his eyes and he’s gripping an axe tightly in his hands, but he’s an ally, he’s fine. Philza turns his attention elsewhere. “*Phil*.”

He has no ears for Fit. Not when the fields are singing a long-forgotten song, and the fires are making thermals beautiful enough to dance in.

“Phil!” his σύναστρο calls out, and Philza goes. “We’re puttin’ up the flag now. Do you wanna do the honors?”

There is something blue and lovingly made in his hands. Philza takes it from him, unrolling it as he goes. It’s in shades of blue like a clear summer sky, dark navy tones of a moonless starry night, ivory white like bones left to bleach on a faraway hill.

He sinks the flag into the ground, and beneath their feet, the world sighs.

“There we go,” someone is saying—no doubt checking communicators and server worlds for updates—but Philza ignores them. His eyes are caught on his σύναστρο’s where he stands with his back to the sinking sun. He casts a longer shadow than he should.

Eyes blink curiously from within them, slowly and sleepily as though newly awake, and Philza blinks back.

“Well,” the owner of the shadow says. He sighs, sheathing his sword, and the blade sings as it returns to its home. “That’s that, isn’t it? We did it, Phil.”

Red skies, burning fields, open horizons. New endings, old beginnings. Philza spreads his wings to tuck one around his σύναστρο, and shivers when he leans in.

“You alright?” Technoblade murmurs to him, but it’s a soft query. It barely disrupts the lull of the high that Philza is caught in, here in a space where the world is slowly spinning to a stop to pause and turn and acknowledge something that they’ve accomplished.

Golden light rises from the earth beneath the Empire’s flag. It flicks its tail in an imperious movement when it’s done emerging, circling lazily in the air around the chrysanthemum, before it launches itself into the sky to tell the good news. Philza watches it go with burning eyes.

“Phil,” Techno says again, and this time Phil blinks.

“Yeah, mate?”

“Oh, there you are.” Techno’s still quiet, but he tilts his head to lean it against Phil’s wing. His hair is tickly against the more sensitive underside; the crown’s humming reverberates in Phil’s bones. “I was sayin’, Phil—we did it. Ta da.”

With this last flag and burning country, they own most of the world, oceans included. Ergo, they are the default ruling faction of Earth.

“Doesn’t feel much different,” Phil lies, and drops Benihime into the void.

Now that he’s paying attention again, Phil takes in their surroundings. The last bastion of the world against the Empire’s supremacy has fallen; it’s not exactly Finch’s territory, but they’re damnably close. There’s not much to burn here in the frigid northern wastes, but there’s tattered banners and forest wreckage aplenty.

No one here had surrendered, so there aren’t even any ceasefires to negotiate or prisoners of war to sort out. The quiet would be unnerving, if there were any quiet at all. Instead the other Empire folks who’d joined them in this last battle are hurrahing each other, cheering for Techno and Phil, clasping each other on the back or hugging or throwing—

Phil squints. Helmets? Weapons? *Something* into the air, in a festive mood that he would expect during the holidays, not after a major battle.

But then again, the flag stands proudly, here and in countless conquered countries and on enough little islands scattered across the seas to make them the ruling faction.

In the back, Fit and Jordan are standing together, two old men watching the young ones around them. When Fit catches Phil looking, he widens his eyes and mouths, *Do it, you coward*.

And as much as Phil wants to kick Fit for the face he’s making, the guy is right. If there’s any perfect moment, then it’s this one.

Techno’s still staring at the sight of the Empire’s flag standing proudly against the sunset. What’s going through his head, Phil still doesn’t know. But the moment of inattention means that Phil can sift through his pocket without him noticing.

“Techno?”

“Yeah?”

“Give me your hand?”

A smile curves under the mask, but Techno obliges him. Phil takes the hand in both of his, and passes Techno the feather.

His friend flinches, of course—surprise has him withdrawing his hand—but Phil’s got fingers around Techno’s palm and wrist and he doesn’t let him let go.

Techno’s voice is quiet when he says, “Phil?” And anyone who’s unfamiliar with him might think that he’s deadpan or unimpressed or heavens forbid *annoyed*, but Phil is close enough to hear the tremor beneath.

Phil lets the battle high adrenaline fill him again and takes the plunge: “I’m sorry about the mess the last time turned into. I swear I didn’t mean to take it back. I was just—nervous, and I panicked, and I freaked out, but I always wanted to give it back to you, I swear—but then I—I chickened out the first time, okay, and the second time, and then *months* had gone by and—I still felt bad, and I still owe you an apology, okay, you deserve one, I fucked up and—”

Techno dips his chin. Phil cuts off the flood of words. He can feel warmth rising to his cheeks, and it has nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with the way that Techno is *looking* at him from behind the mask, but—

Then Techno sighs, and his smile is fond, and here in the battlefield where there is only the Empire and their allies left standing, he pulls out his own wings to fold them both into the fabric of the universe.

“You don’t need to apologize,” Techno murmurs to him, and Phil feels himself settling. Focusing properly again, as he’s pulled back into regular orbit. “We’re friends, Phil.”

And that’s true, but it feels like Phil’s heart has grown too large to be contained in his rib cage and there are weighty words on his tongue, and Techno calls the others *friends*, too, and it’s not a large enough word to neatly box up all the emotions that wells up in Phil when he watches Techno do what he does best.

There are words and there are Words and there are the closest approximations that a human tongue can get, but—

As much as Phil knows Techno, Techno knows him, too. He raises a hand and brings Phil closer in and tucks them both into each other, chins hooked over shoulders, fingers tightening and watching each other’s backs.

“It’s fine,” Techno murmurs, and Phil doesn’t need to be bleeding over in order to hear the depths of all the things that Techno is letting go unsaid.

They’re home and Techno is sitting with some of the children of the citadel, waiting patiently as they braid flowers into his hair, Phil watching over them with lightness in his chest, when

they feel the shift in the air.

The Admins of Earth, goes out the call, *summon the rulers of the Antarctic Empire for trial.*

“For what crime?” Techno contests, over the server-wide communications. By his knees the children are giggling, whispering amongst themselves of how the admins are tempting the blood god’s wrath.

Phil would be proud, except he’s pretty sure that Sky had started that one in an attempt to embarrass Techno, not make some handles on a process that can’t be stopped.

For the crime of world conquest and domination.

Techno blinks slowly. One of the children tugs on his elbow and asks, “Isn’t that the point of the server?”

“Yup,” Techno drawls. He looks up; the flowers are framing the feather in his hair, tucked safely around his crown. He’s sitting here carefree in the sun, secure in the Empire’s place as a ruling faction with alliances enough to keep them stable, and Phil wants to preserve this. In a picture, in a sentiment, a snapshot caught in time—

“So are we goin’?”

But he also remembers the young joy in Wilbur’s voice. “It’ll be a sham trial, mate.”

“Oh, of course.” Techno cracks his neck; the children shout, young and innocent, at the sharp popping noises. “But it’ll be funny.”

Chapter End Notes

Aside from the Plot, Technoblade's (the blood god's) entire bit about souls is a shout out to the fact that Hypixel's SkyWars gives you souls as "currency" of sorts whenever you make a kill. :D

χρυσωπός means *with golden eyes or face, beaming like gold, of the sun*.

Turtle boats are also a real thing!

Wilbur is more of a protege to Phil at this point than “son.”

End Notes

My writing playlist for this fic is now up on Spotify, if you're interested in that kind of thing.

This story is part of the LLF Comment Project, which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:

- Short comments
- Long comments
- Questions
- “<3” as extra kudos
- Reader-reader interaction

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This author sees and appreciates all comments but may not reply due to exhaustion and anxiety.

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Works inspired by this one

heart and soul by skittykitty

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